Balancing Stress with The Vagus Nerve

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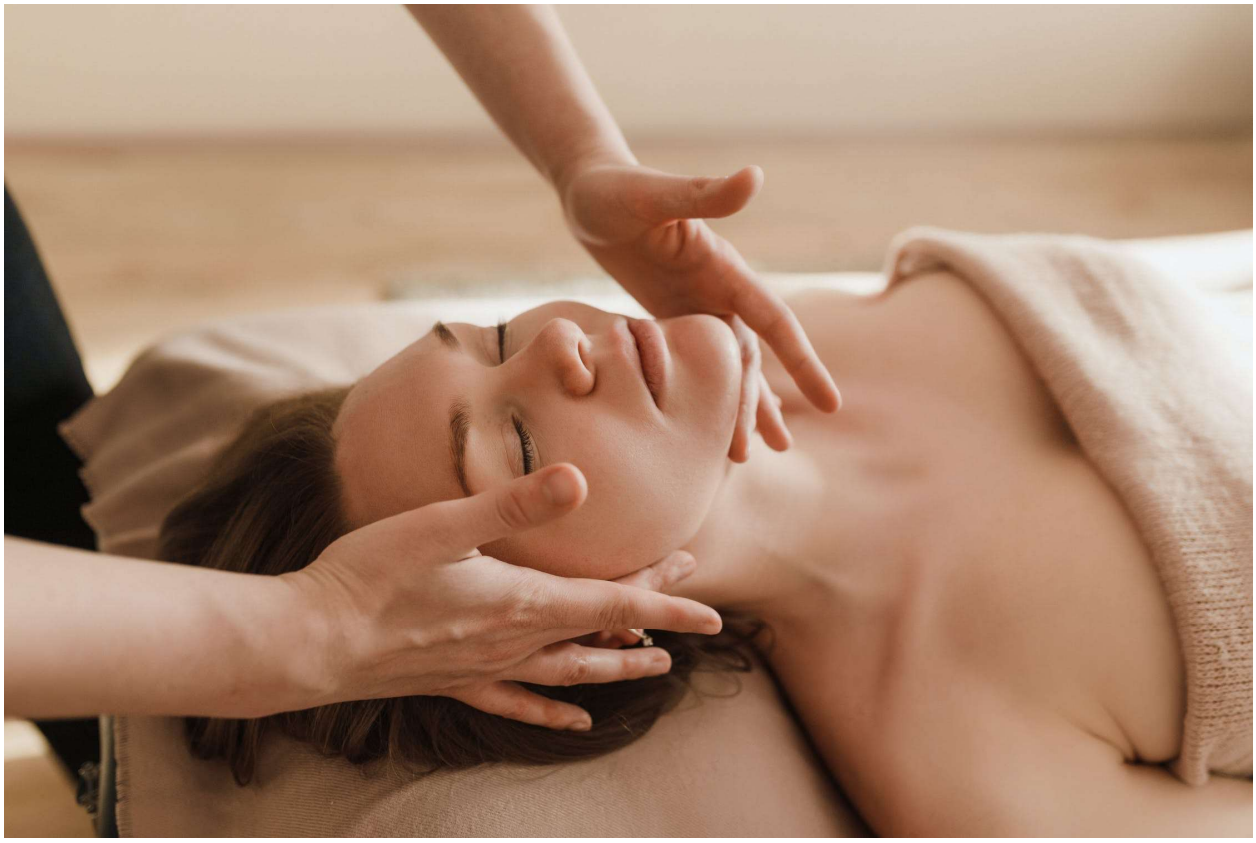

The vagus nerve is the tenth cranial nerve which emerges from the Central Nervous System and is integral to our ability to relax to counterbalance stress. The vagus nerve is critical for our survival and manages our vital functions. It emerges from the cranium just behind our ears and travels down through the neck and throat past the hyoid bone into the chest cavity on its way into our abdomen.

The vagus nerve has 13 branches. A few extend to parts of the throat. Other branches innervate the heart, lungs, and stomach. It joins other nerves to help regulate our breathing and heart rate. Some branches extend to the liver and intestines.

We can already see how important this nerve is to regulate the vital functions of our body.

The Central Nervous System (CNS) is composed of two systems, the Somatic Nervous System that regulates movement, and the Autonomic Nervous System, that regulates our automatic functions, like breathing, heart rate and digestion.
The autonomic nervous system in turn has two branches: sympathetic and parasympathetic. The sympathetic is best known as the "fight-or-flight," system and the parasympathetic as the "rest-and-digest" system. The sympathetic nervous system is designed to give us energy needed to manage threats (real or perceived) to survive, while the parasympathetic works on our vital functions and relaxation.

The ***vagus nerve*** manages these two systems, helping us feel energized and excited when necessary, and relaxed and at ease when not.

When the sympathetic nervous system is activated, the parasympathetic is inhibited. It is not possible for both systems to work simultaneously. Since our body needs relaxation after stress, the parasympathetic nervous system needs to be activated after a stressful event for us to return to a state of balance. Unfortunately, in our hectic and often fast-paced lives, it is common for the sympathetic nervous system to be activated most of time, with little to no parasympathetic activation. When we feel stressed and are unable to relax, this is typically what is underway.

While not problematic in the short term, being stuck in a state of elevated stress can result in health issues. For example, the activation of sympathetic without parasympathetic activation as described above, can result in constipation, diarrhea, or irritable bowel symptoms. It can also result in fast and shallow breathing which when repetitive, can change our breathing pattern into a chronically shallow one. Over time, this in turn can trigger the fight-or-flight response keeping us stuck in the stress response. If this is not balanced or reset, it can lead to wear and tear of our heart tissue, leading to an erosion of cardiac health.

By learning how to regulate the stress response and stimulate the parasympathetic state of "rest-and-digest" also called the ***"relaxation response,"*** gives our body an opportunity to offset the effects of stress.

One way to stimulate the relaxation response is to practice some form of meditation. This can include abdominal breathing exercises, walking or engaging in a meditative activity, anything that helps to quiet the mind. Even activities that relax you like cooking, knitting or gardening can be meditative and stimulate the relaxation response.

One way to offset the stress response is to get regular bodywork. In my Craniosacral practice, I use techniques that relax the vagus nerve and its pathways through the body. After a session on my table, many of my clients say they "feel more relaxed then

they have ever felt.” Additionally, I share simple and easy customized tips and techniques to help my clients maintain a state of relaxation in real time.

I invite you to try a Craniosacral session and experience how relaxed you can feel when your vagus nerve is balanced. It may be time to allow yourself some peace and quiet in your body, your heart and your mind.

©April2022, Emily Klik, LMT, CST is a CranioSacral Therapist at Ommani. She sees clients who are free of symptoms on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Call our office at 262.695.5311 to schedule an appointment.