



## The Vagus Nerve in Therapeutic Practice

by Ann Linda Baldwin, PhD

### What is the Vagus Nerve?

The **vagus nerve** is the longest nerve in the body that stretches from the base of the skull to the base of the spine. It passes through the throat region and then branches into all major organs. Together, with other neighboring cranial nerves that innervate the eyes, nasal passages, tongue, and facial muscles the vagal nerve helps you relax, digest, resist infection, control inflammation, think clearly and socially engage more easily and effectively.

The vagus nerve is key in shifting you from the “fight-or-flight” mode to the “rest-and-digest mode, so the body has some downtime and a chance to repair itself. Sometimes the vagus nerve does not work as well as it should, especially when you are under chronic stress. These are times when the vagus nerve could do with some help. Because the vagus nerve and its branches extend into so many organs and structures, there are many routes through which you can *indirectly* access the nerve branches, and many techniques you can use to improve their functions. Some of these techniques can be done on your own, but others require some help from a healthcare professional, such as a massage practitioner, acupuncturist, aromatherapist, yoga teacher, biofeedback expert, dietician, somatic therapist, or equine assisted learning therapist.

Ann Baldwin has written a book, “The Vagus Nerve in Therapeutic Practice. Working with Clients to Manage Stress and Enhance Mind-Body Function”, that describes and explains these techniques in detail. This book is written both for therapists who want to extend their skills to include vagal stimulation techniques, and for members of the public who desire additional methods to reduce their stress by themselves and/or need advice regarding exactly how different types of health practitioners can help them.

Each chapter provides practical, evidence-based methods that can be used to stimulate the vagus nerve, other cranial nerves and limbic system (ventral vagal complex), illustrated by a case history from a complementary medicine or holistic practitioner. The functions of major branches of the vagus nerve and other neighboring cranial nerves are discussed in turn; in each case the mechanism by which indirect nerve stimulation improves relaxation and health is outlined, and a practical way to engage the nerve branch and limbic system is described with the help of a case study. An addendum includes an easily referenced summary of the exercises described throughout the book, as well as routines for utilizing combinations of the exercises on a daily, weekly and monthly basis.

This book will enable healthcare professionals to attain a solid grasp of the clinical significance of regulating the vagus nerve and provide them with simple ways to do it.

Here is one exercise that is included in the book that you can do by yourself, the Body Scan. These instructions are from Laura K. Schenck, PhD, LPC, a licensed professional counsellor from the University of Northern Colorado.

- Find a comfortable position, seated or lying down, where your body feels at ease and supported by the ground, chair, or cushion beneath you.
- First, bring your attention to your breath. Notice the sensation of the air as you inhale through your nostrils, and again as you exhale through your mouth.
- Pause to make room for whatever you may be feeling, including tension or discomfort.
- Now, start at your feet by bringing your awareness to the physical sensations present in your feet, calves, knees, and thighs. Notice the sensations in your muscles as you allow your mindful focus to slowly move upward.
- If you notice any areas of tension or holding during this body scan, pause to mindfully attend to this tension, then deliberately allow the tension to dissipate and release.
- Next, take a deep breath in as you bring awareness to sensations present in your abdomen, torso, and lower back. Notice your spine as you gradually allow your focus to continually move upward along your body, remembering to pause at any areas of tension or holding, allowing those areas to gently relax.
- Maintain a focus on the rhythm of your breath as you slowly breathe in... and slowly breathe out... allowing any physical discomfort to be released as you slowly exhale... imagining the tension dissolve with each out breath.
- Continue to allow your focus to continue upwards, noticing your hands, arms, elbows, and shoulders. Become awareness of any tightness, discomfort, or holding in these areas. Use the gentle flow of your breath to bring your awareness to these areas and allow them to release as you slowly and gently exhale.
- Finally, bring your attention to your neck, face, and head. Notice the sensations present in your jaw, mouth, and eyes. Allow any areas of tension to relax, noticing the tension melt away as you bring your mindful awareness to these areas.

"Vagus Nerve in Therapeutic Practice,' provides an exceptional synthesis in our understanding of the mind body connection. Ann offers deep scientific insights into the central role of complementary and integrative therapies in balancing the autonomic system. All this is expressed beautifully through a unique combination of perspectives from history, spirituality, poetry and providers - a wonderful addition to the field for patients, practitioners and researchers." Kavita Prasad MD FACP.

Link for purchase:

<https://us.singingdragon.com/products/the-vagus-nerve-in-therapeutic-practice>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Ann Linda Baldwin, PhD**, is a recently retired Professor of Physiology at the University of Arizona and Director of Mind-Body-Science. Her degrees are BSc in Physics, University of Bristol UK, MSc in Radiation Physics and PhD in Physiology, University of London, UK. She has completed Bio-Well Training level 2, is a HeartMath certified trainer, a Reiki Master, a certified trauma release exercise (TRE) provider, and is experienced in Equine Assisted Learning. With these tools Ann helps people reverse the damaging effects of stress on mind and body. She has published over 125 articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals and two books, "Reiki in Clinical Practice. A Science Based Guide", and "The Vagus Nerve in Therapeutic Practice. Working with Clients to Manage Stress and Enhance Mind-Body Function". Ann has received 30 years of funding from federal institutions and has served on review panels for National Institutes of Health. With her Reiki training and scientific background, Ann bridges the gap between energy healing and quantitative scientific enquiry. In her spare time Ann rides her horse and is a horse handler for Therapeutic Riding of Tucson.

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