



Activating the Parasympathetic Wing of Your Nervous System

These exercises stimulate the part of your nervous system that creates positive feeling, thus reducing stress, enhancing positive emotion, and strengthening the body's defenses. This part, the parasympathetic wing, evolved along with the sympathetic wing (the part that responds to threats and excitement) to relax you once anxiety-inducing situations have passed. By purposefully activating the parasympathetic wing of your nervous system (or PNS), you can take advantage of its natural cool-down effects and stop the cycle of chronic stress.

METHOD

Summary:

Eight different methods activate the PNS, increasing relaxation and providing a number of benefits.

Long Version

- Exercise #1: Take deep breaths. When inhaling, completely fill the lungs, hold for a second, and then exhale slowly. Try doing this for a whole minute. This relaxed method of breathing expands the branches in your airways called bronchioles, activating the PNS that controls them, causing them (and the rest of the body and mind) to relax.
 - Exercise #2: Relax your body. You can use progressive relaxation techniques or a basic relaxation meditation. You could do a comfortable yoga stretch or just close your eyes and imagine yourself in a comfortable setting, whether its a favorite armchair or a sunny beach. The parasympathetic nervous system causes you to relax, but by “actively” relaxing, you activate it, causing you to relax even more. Call it a non-vicious circle.
 - Exercise #3: Breathe so that your inhalation and exhalation last the same amount of time, for example, you might count slowly to five for each. While doing this, imagine this breath coming in and out of your heart center in your chest, radiating love, gratitude, and peace. Integrate this positive emotion into your own brain. This exercise is called “increasing heart rate variability”; it
- Date / Time So far today, have you brought kind awareness to your:
Thoughts? Heart? Body? None of the Above





- Exercise #4: Become mindful of physical sensation. Listen to your body and feel with clarity and relaxed concentration—to your breath, to the feeling of your chest or your feet or your tongue in your mouth. By becoming mindful of the body, you are also activating the PNS.
- Exercise #5: Yawning activates the PNS. Scientists are not sure why.
- Exercise #6: Meditation also activates the PNS by pulling the attention away from stress and threats. Meditating even for a small amount every day is one of the most powerful ways to work with your PNS. Learn more about meditation by reading What Is Meditation?
- Exercise #7: Focus on the positive. Positive feelings like gratitude, lovingkindness, contentment, and tranquility arouse the PNS. It's sometimes hard to make yourself think positive on demand. Some techniques for arousing positive emotion includes Community Service / Charity, Gratitude Practice, and Lovingkindness. You can also try Taking in the Good and the Three Good Things Exercise.
- Exercise #8: It may seem silly, but fiddling with your upper lip has been shown in anecdotal evidence to increase PNS activity. If nothing else, it sure is fun. How often you followed them.
- Look for specific instances and congratulate yourself for any times, however few or brief, that you embodied your intention and then congratulate yourself!

HISTORY

The parasympathetic wing of the nervous system has been with us long before we were even human; it's a crucial part of every animal's brain. However, it wasn't until very recently with modern advances in neuroimaging that we could see how the PNS works for us.

NOTES

If the parasympathetic system goes into overdrive, the individual may freeze up completely, unable to act at all. As in all things, care must be taken to balance neurological responses. Remember that stress and anxiety are natural and important.

