

Take control of your nervous system



Every day, your nervous system speeds up and slows down as you respond to different situations. This is great – it enables you to do what needs to be done. Sometimes, however, your nervous system can become overwhelmed. You might have too much on your plate, you could be worried about something – or maybe you're just plain tired. When this happens, ancient evolutionary defence mechanisms can kick in. Often, we experience fairly mild versions of these, e.g.:

- **Fight:** feeling tetchy or impatient, snapping, or using strong language.
- **Flight:** feeling unsettled, as though you can't focus or get anything done.
- **Freeze:** feeling stuck: staring at the wall, or into the fridge.
- **Faint:** feeling lethargic, as though all the energy has drained out of you.

Manual override levers

When this happens, there are a number of things we can do to regulate our nervous system, to get back to 'the zone' where we feel safe and comfortable and can do what needs to be done. We have three main 'manual override' levers: the mind, the body and the breath. Here are a few exercises that you might find useful. In each case, there are essentially two stages. First, tune in and notice what's going on. Second: take action, informed by what you notice.

Breath

As meditation teachers often say: "Bring your attention to the breath". How are you breathing currently? Don't change it yet – just notice how you are breathing. Is it fast or slow? Deep or shallow? Loud or silent? Is it different in the morning and the evening? How about before, during and after meals? If you notice that your breathing has become fast or shallow, you can regulate this easily by taking a few deep breaths, exhaling for longer than you inhale: in for 4, hold for 4, out for 6, for example. Alternatively, if you need waking up, you might wish to reverse the timing. Breathe in for 8, hold for 8, and exhale for 4, for example. There are many more breathing exercises available online. Yogis have been doing breathing exercises like this for thousands of years. They can't all be wrong!

Body

Without moving, do a quick body scan. How does each part of your body feel? Where do you hold stress or tension? Neck, shoulders, chest? Do you have a clenched jaw, or a furrowed brow perhaps? If you check in like this regularly, you may begin to notice patterns. How does your body feel at different times of the day, week or year? How does this relate to your movements, your patterns of behaviour, or your physical environment? Noticing how your body feels can help you identify which activities or movements might be effective when you need to refresh or reboot your nervous system. You may choose to focus a stretch, or a repetitive movement, on a particular area of your body. Learn a few simple routines that work for you – neck rolls, back twists, balancing on one leg –

whatever works for you. If you notice addictive urges kicking in – urges to eat unhealthy things, or check your phone once too often – a 5-4-3-2-1 sense scan can help override your nervous system. Bring your attention to five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. By the time you get to the end, the impulse will likely have passed.

Mind

Bring your attention to your thoughts. Are they racing, are you 'in the zone', or are you staring into space and finding it difficult to concentrate? Try to 'sit behind' your thoughts for a few minutes. Notice them as they come and go. How does your thinking change at different times in the day? If you should notice that your internal chatter is becoming more negative than normal – thinking 'I can't do this any more', playing out conflict scenarios, or catastrophising all the ways in which you might make a fool of yourself – try flipping the script by asking yourself 'What would be the opposite of that thought? What if I believed that?' The simple technique of 'transcendental meditation' – repeating a nonsense word in your mind over and over again until your mind stops racing, and can even stop thinking – is an incredibly powerful way to override your ego and put it on mute for a few minutes. There are also many guided meditations and visualisations available online. Find some tools that work for you.

The key insight

These 'quick fixes' exemplify the three ways in which we can regulate our emotions, and therefore our behaviours: through the mind, the body and the breath. In each of these examples, we are essentially bringing ourselves into the moment. This is really helpful because whatever is on your mind – past events you are chewing over, or worries about the future – it is very unlikely that you are actually in any real and present danger in the present moment. This has the effect of sending a strong message to your autonomic nervous system: whatever else might be going on, you are safe from threat. You remain 'in the zone' where learning, critical thinking and prosocial behaviour can take place. It's a really good idea for parents and carers to share this insight, and these activities, with their child. Practice with them, talk honestly and openly about them, and do so regularly. As with anything, these things get easier with practice – but the impact on your mental and physical wellbeing over a lifetime can be profound.

Questions for reflection

- Which of these techniques works best for you?
- Which do you find difficult, or challenging?
- Do you notice any resistance to using these techniques – in your thoughts, feelings or behaviours? If so:
 - What do you think might be behind this resistance?
 - What might you be able to do to get around it?

If you find this question of resistance difficult to answer, don't worry. Some people spend a lifetime trying to get to the bottom of this!