

Understanding Vagal Tone and OCD

Supporting Your Nervous System for Better Mental Health

What is Vagal Tone?

The vagus nerve is the longest nerve in your body, running from your brain stem down through your neck, chest, and abdomen. It's like a superhighway of communication between your brain and your body, particularly affecting your heart, lungs, and digestive system.

Vagal tone refers to how well your vagus nerve is functioning. Think of it like muscle tone - the better your vagal tone, the more resilient and balanced your nervous system becomes.

The Connection Between Vagal Tone and OCD

Research has shown some fascinating connections between vagal tone and OCD symptoms:

How Poor Vagal Tone May Contribute to OCD

- **Stuck in "alert mode"**: When vagal tone is low, your nervous system may get stuck in a state of high alert, making it harder to feel calm and safe
- **Difficulty with flexibility**: The vagus nerve helps us shift between different states. Poor vagal tone can make it harder to "unstick" from repetitive thoughts and behaviours
- **Heightened stress response**: Low vagal tone is associated with increased anxiety and difficulty recovering from stress
- **Gut-brain connection**: The vagus nerve is crucial for gut-brain communication, and we know that gut health can influence OCD symptoms

The "Window of Tolerance" and Dissociation

Think of your nervous system as having a "window of tolerance" - a zone where you feel calm, focused, and able to cope with daily challenges. When vagal tone is good, this window is wider. When it's poor, the window becomes narrow, and you're more likely to move outside this zone in two different ways:

Hyperarousal (fight/flight response):

- Anxious or panicked feelings
- Racing heart
- Feeling "wired" or agitated
- Racing thoughts

- Hypervigilance

Hypoarousal (freeze/collapse response):

- **Dissociation** - feeling disconnected from your body or surroundings
- Feeling "shut down" or numb
- Brain fog or difficulty thinking clearly
- Feeling like you're "not really there"
- Emotional numbness
- Feeling disconnected from yourself
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Important insight: When anxiety or OCD becomes overwhelming, your nervous system may actually flip from hyperarousal (anxiety/panic) into hypoarousal (dissociation/shutdown) as a protective mechanism. This is your body's way of saying "this is too much" and creating distance from the intensity.

Both states indicate that your nervous system has moved outside its window of tolerance and needs support to return to a regulated state.

Signs of Good vs. Poor Vagal Tone

Signs of Good Vagal Tone

- Feeling calm and centred most of the time
- Ability to recover quickly from stress
- Good digestion
- Steady heart rate variability
- Feeling socially connected
- Sleeping well
- Ability to focus and think clearly

Signs of Poor Vagal Tone

- Feeling anxious or "wired" frequently
- **Dissociating when overwhelmed** - feeling disconnected or "not really there"
- Difficulty calming down after stress
- **Flipping between anxiety and numbness/shutdown**
- Digestive issues (bloating, irregular bowel movements)
- Feeling disconnected from others
- Sleep difficulties
- Racing thoughts or mind feeling "stuck"
- Heightened sensitivity to stress
- **Brain fog, especially during or after stressful periods**

How This Relates to Your Journey

Given your history of:

- **ECT treatments:** These may have impacted your nervous system's natural regulation
- **Hormonal changes:** Perimenopause can influence vagus nerve function

- **Mould exposure:** Environmental toxins can affect vagal nerve function
- **OCD symptoms:** The "stuck" quality of OCD thoughts and behaviours may be related to nervous system inflexibility
- **Trauma experiences:** Trauma often affects vagal tone and nervous system flexibility

Improving your vagal tone could be another piece of the puzzle in supporting your overall recovery.

The Good News: Vagal Tone Can Be Improved!

Unlike some aspects of our physiology, vagal tone is remarkably responsive to specific practices. Through targeted exercises, you can actually strengthen your vagus nerve function and improve your nervous system's resilience.

Practical Activity: The 4-7-8 Vagal Toning Breath

This simple breathing technique specifically activates your vagus nerve and can help improve vagal tone over time. It's particularly helpful for OCD because it:

- Activates the "rest and digest" response
- Helps shift out of repetitive thought patterns
- Creates a sense of calm and safety
- **Can help you reconnect with your body when dissociating**
- **Supports your nervous system in returning to its "window of tolerance"**
- Can be used as an "in-the-moment" tool during high anxiety or when feeling disconnected

How to Practice the 4-7-8 Breath

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. **Find a comfortable position** - Sitting or lying down, spine straight
2. **Place one hand on your chest, one on your belly** - This helps you monitor your breathing
3. **Exhale completely** through your mouth to start fresh
4. **Breathe in through your nose** for 4 counts (belly should rise, chest stays relatively still)
5. **Hold your breath** for 7 counts
6. **Exhale slowly through your mouth** for 8 counts (making a gentle "whoosh" sound)
7. **Repeat 3-4 cycles** to start, building up to 6-8 cycles as you become comfortable

Important Notes

- **Start slowly:** If holding for 7 counts feels too difficult, start with 4-4-6 or even 3-3-4 pattern
- **Don't strain:** The breath should feel manageable, not forced

- **Focus on the exhale:** The long exhale is what specifically activates the vagus nerve
- **Practice regularly:** Ideally twice daily (morning and evening) for best results

When to Use This Technique

As a Daily Practice

- **Morning:** To set a calm tone for the day
- **Evening:** To activate rest and digest mode before sleep
- **Before stressful situations:** To prepare your nervous system

As an "In-the-Moment" Tool

- When you notice OCD thoughts intensifying
- **When you feel yourself starting to dissociate or "disconnect"**
- **To reconnect with your body when feeling "not really there"**
- Before or after exposure exercises
- When feeling overwhelmed or anxious
- When stuck in a compulsive cycle
- Before making important decisions
- **When you notice you've "checked out" mentally**

Integration with Your Current Protocol

This breathing technique works beautifully alongside your:

- **Mindfulness practices:** Use it as your foundation breath before other techniques
- **"This Way Is Up" exercises:** Incorporate before starting sessions
- **Vaping reduction:** Use when cravings arise
- **Sleep support:** Perfect as part of your bedtime routine

Tracking Your Progress

Consider keeping a simple log of:

- How often you practice (aim for twice daily)
- Your stress/anxiety level before and after (1-10 scale)
- Any changes in sleep quality
- Shifts in OCD symptom intensity
- Overall sense of calm throughout the day

Sample Tracking Template you can use in your phone

Date: _____

Morning Practice: Y/N

Evening Practice: Y/N

Stress Before: ____/10

Stress After: ____/10

Sleep Quality: ____/10

OCD Intensity Today: ____/10

Notes: _____

Understanding the Science

The 4-7-8 breath works because:

- **The long exhale** activates your parasympathetic nervous system (rest and digest)
- **The breath hold** increases carbon dioxide tolerance, which improves stress resilience
- **The focused counting** engages your prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain involved in executive control
- **The rhythm** creates what's called "coherent breathing," which optimises heart rate variability

Building Your Practice

Week 1-2: Foundation

- Practice twice daily
- Start with 3-4 cycles
- Focus on establishing the rhythm
- Don't worry about perfect counts

Week 3-4: Expansion

- Increase to 6-8 cycles
- Begin using as an in-the-moment tool
- Notice patterns in when it's most helpful
- Experiment with different times of day

Beyond Month 1: Integration

- Use intuitively throughout the day
- Combine with other vagal toning practices
- Notice overall changes in stress resilience
- Consider learning additional vagal toning techniques

Other Simple Vagal Toning Practices

Once you're comfortable with the breathing technique, you might explore:

- **Cold water face splash:** Activates the "dive response"
- **Humming or singing:** Vibrations stimulate the vagus nerve
- **Gargling:** Similar vibration benefits
- **Gentle neck stretches:** Physical release of vagal tension
- **Mindful eating:** Slow, conscious eating supports vagal function

Remember

Improving vagal tone is like building physical fitness - it takes consistent practice to see lasting changes. Be patient with yourself and celebrate small improvements. This practice works synergistically with all the other supportive strategies in your current protocol.

Your nervous system has an incredible capacity for healing and adaptation. By supporting your vagal tone, you're giving your body's natural wisdom the tools it needs to find greater balance and resilience.

This information sheet is designed to complement your existing treatment plan and should not replace professional medical advice. Always discuss new practices with your healthcare providers, especially if you have any breathing-related health conditions.

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