



Exercise: Engage the Vagal Brake

This exercise brings attention to the role of the ventral vagal pathway to the heart's pacemaker (the sinoatrial node) in regulating autonomic responses. Using image, clients bring the vagal brake into useable form and can access and exercise its important regulating capacities.

Background: An efficiently functioning vagal brake is an essential component of resilience.

Any practice that builds regulation and resilience engages the vagal brake. The vagal brake is responsible for speeding up and slowing down heart rate to effectively respond to the needs of the moment. The vagal pathway to the heart becomes more active or less active, relaxing and re-engaging, using electrical signals and neurotransmitters. The vagal brake works similarly to the brakes on a bicycle. Imagine you are riding a bike down a hill, and you want to go a little faster. Release the brakes a bit and feel the wheels spin faster. Gently squeeze the brakes to slow down.

The vagal brake allows more of the sympathetic nervous system's energy to be felt while keeping the ventral vagal system online and in charge. As the vagal brake begins to relax, the energy flowing through the vagal pathway is reduced a bit and the sympathetic energy that is in the background begins to move into the foreground. Then as the vagal brake re-engages, the process is reversed, sympathetic moving to the background and ventral vagal back to the foreground.

With the vagal brake relaxing but not fully releasing, you have access to a range of responses including feeling calm, engaged, joyful, excited, passionate, playful, attentive, alert, or watchful, while still safely situated in the ventral vagal system. The vagal brake allows you to rapidly engage and disengage, to quickly energize and calm in response to the demands of the

moment. When working well, it brings flexibility to your responses and a sense of ease to transitions.

Using metaphor and imagery you can experiment with engaging, relaxing, and re-engaging the vagal brake and experience the ways this part of the ventral vagal system helps you safely navigate everyday challenges. With ongoing practice, you create more flexibility in your responses and feel the benefits of a resilient autonomic nervous system.

Steps:

1. Invite an image of your vagal brake that brings to life your sense of regulating the increase and decrease of energy in your ventral vagal pathways. Find an image that gives you the feeling of controlling the dimensions of something. Images include bicycle brakes, a door, bridge, gate, water faucet, dimmer switch. Let your imagination guide you as you look for something that you can manipulate and results in changes that can be measured.
2. Write a simple story about your vagal brake using the image. Describe your image and how you use it to increase energy and return to calm.
3. Use a movement. Not everyone creates imagery to come into connection with inner experience. For some people movement is the preferred method. Find a movement that changes shape to illustrate the increase and decrease of energy.
4. Connect your vagal brake image and/or movement to your breath cycle. A subtle pattern of relaxation and re-engagement happens with every breath cycle. With each inhalation, the brake relaxes just a bit allowing a slight speeding up of the heart and then re-engages on the exhalation to bring a return of the slower beat. Take a moment and play with these

two pathways. Relax then re-engage, relax then re-engage with each breath in an unending cycle. Move through several breath cycles until it begins to feel natural.

5. Use the image or movement to intentionally engage, relax, and re-engage the brake.
 - See yourself as an active operator of your vagal brake shaping the rise and fall of energy. Bring the image to life — see it, hear it, feel yourself adjusting it, and feel your energy moving in synchrony with the changing image.
 - Bring movement of your vagal brake into awareness either in outward action or inward experience. Feel the ways you move your body as you increase and decrease the amount of sympathetic energy in your system.
6. Play with the experience of intentionally exercising your vagal brake.
 - Start with a small challenge, perhaps something that is commonly experienced in your day-to-day life. On a scale of intensity from 1-10, choose something in the 1-3 range.
 - Use your image or movement to relax the brake to meet your chosen challenge and re-engage the brake when the challenge is over. Feel the influence you have over the ways your vagal brake works in service of the successful resolution of the challenge.
7. Experiment with a variety of challenges. Build confidence in using your vagal brake to meet everyday challenges.
 - Once you feel confidence in successfully meeting small challenges, choose a slightly stronger challenge. Notice how your vagal brake can relax and allow your energy to rise to more intense challenges while maintaining the ventral vagal state of safety and then re-engage bringing a return to your ventral vagal starting

point.

- Practice using your vagal brake with environmental experiences
- Practice using your vagal brake with relationship stressors.

Tips: Resilience is the ability to return to a ventral vagal state following a move into sympathetic or dorsal vagal responses. Autonomic state shifts in response to the challenges of everyday life are a normal and expected experience. The goal is not to always be in a state of ventral vagal regulation but rather to be able to flexibly navigate the small, ordinary shifts that a part of everyday life and build enough resilience to weather the ones that are traumatic. Your clients build resilience by moving through cycles of regulation, dysregulation, and the restoration of regulation.