

Nervous System Soothing Exercises

Compiled by Gwynn Raimondi, MA, LMFTA

The following are simple and practical exercises and practices you can do to help to soothe your nervous system when it becomes activated. I recommend practicing one or two of the exercises every day, when you are not feeling particularly stressed or activated, to help build muscle memory and to move the exercises into the implicit memory of your brain so they can become an automatic response in times of stress and activation. A great time to practice many of the exercises is as you are getting ready to go to sleep.

After each exercise I offer a brief explanation of why it works to help soothe your nervous system.

I invite you to play with each of these exercises and find the ones that feel most at home for you and then to practice them regularly.

Heart Hold

Place your right hand over your heart so that the heel of your hand is at your heart and your fingertips are at your collarbone. Apply as much pressure with your hand as you need/want. You can also put your left hand over the top of your right to apply more pressure. Alternatively place your left hand on your abdomen so that your pinky finger is just above your belly button. Apply pressure at your belly and heart at the same time.

Why this works

Your right hand is applying pressure to your polyvagal nerve, which is the "trauma" nerve. This nerve is activated in times of stress and anxiety, and when we feel "triggered". The pressure helps to soothe the nerve and sends messages to your body and brain that you are safe.

You can do this at anytime. It also can help to relax you at bedtime and help to quiet your mind.

Butterfly Tap

Cross/fold your arms at your chest so that your hands are resting at your elbows or upper arm. Alternate tapping one arm then the other with your hands (it is important to do it alternatively and not in unison). Alternatively you can "drum" or tap your fingers only on the opposite arm, then tap fingers of other hand. You can tap or drum as gently or as firmly as you want/need.

Why this works

This exercises stimulates the brain cross-laterally, which means it makes each half of our brain talk to the other. Because we are having each side of our brain talk to the other we are keeping our

functioning up in pre-frontal and frontal cortex, allowing us to soothe our entire nervous system. In times of danger, perceived or real, our functioning moves back into the amygdala, or fight/flight/freeze & raw emotion state. By keeping our functioning in our prefrontal and frontal cortex we are telling our body we are safe.

You can do this at any time. It also can help to relax you at bedtime and help to quiet your mind.

Side Sweep

Place your right hand/fingertips at the top of your left ear as if you were going to tuck your hair behind your ear. Then run your fingers down (as if tucking hair) your ear, down the side of your neck, down your shoulder, to the inside of your arm and all the way down (on the inside of your arm) to your hand and then "brush off". Repeat on your right side with your left hand. Do as many times as you want/need, remembering to try to do an equal(ish) number of "brushes" on each side of your body.

Why this works

This exercise stimulates the brain cross-laterally, which means it makes each half of our brain talk to the other. Because we are having each side of our brain talk to the other we are keeping our functioning up in pre-frontal and frontal cortex, allowing us to soothe our entire nervous system. In times of danger, perceived or real, our functioning moves back into the amygdala, or fight/flight/freeze & raw emotion state. By keeping our functioning in our prefrontal and frontal cortex we are telling our body we are safe.

You can do this at any time. It also can help to relax you at bedtime and help to quiet your mind.

Lip Tap

Use the index finger of your dominant hand, and gently tap your lips.

Why this works

This exercise causes salivation. When the body is in a perceived threat state, salivation stops (our mouths go dry). By promoting salivation we are giving signals to our brain and body that we are safe and this in turn calms the entire nervous system.

You can do this at any time. It also can help to relax you at bedtime and help to quiet your mind.

Neck turn

Sit or stand and *slowly* move your head (so that your neck moves too) from left to right and back again, noticing and commenting on (either in your head or out loud) every thing you see. Comment on colors, textures, how the light or shadows are, etc. It is important to move your head and neck and not just scan with your eyes.

Why this works

By consciously moving our head slowly and naming colors and textures and objects, we are activating our frontal and pre-frontal cortexes. This sends messages to our body and brain that we are in a safe space and thereby helps to calm the nervous system.

You can do this at any time. It also can help to relax you at bedtime and help to quiet your mind.

Watching Your Breath/Counting Exhales

Turn your focus to your breathing. You do not need to alter your breathing in any way, simply turn your focus to it. Notice your exhales. Now start counting your exhales up to ten and then start over again at one. Count as many cycles of ten as you need/want.

Why this works

This exercise works on two fronts. 1. By focusing on our breath and noticing it, we are encouraging ourselves to be present with our body and the now. 2. Counting is a function of our frontal lobe. By counting we are keeping our frontal lobe engaged, thereby giving messages to our brain that we are safe which then sends the same message to our nervous system.

You can do this at anytime. It also can help to relax you at bedtime and help to quiet your mind.

Jaw tap

Place your fingertips on your jaw line and gently tap. You can tap in unison or alternate sides, whatever feels good and right to you.

Why this works

This exercise works on two levels. 1. By tapping the jaw you are connecting to it and encouraging it to relax and go slack. When our jaw is slack, this tells our brain that we are safe, which then in turn soothes the nervous system. 2. This tapping also stimulates salivation. When we salivate we are also sending a message to our brain that we are safe and this in turn calms the nervous system.

You can do this at any time. It also can help to relax you at bedtime and help to quiet your mind.

Shake it out

Shake your hands from the wrist, strongly. Then shake your lower arms from the elbow along with your wrists. Then shake arms from shoulder.

Shake one foot from the ankle, then the other. Next shake leg from the knee, then other leg. Next from the hip, then other leg.

Now shake your whole body, strongly, and in big movements. Do this until you want to stop.

Why this works

Shaking out the body has been shown to help physically reset our nervous system. Additionally, big movements help to burn up cortisol that is released when under stress or feeling high amounts of anxiety. Finally, big and strong physical movement helps to release endorphins which help our moods to shift.

You can do this at any time, however I recommend *not* doing it at night before bed as many find it to be energizing.

Drink Up

Drink a glass of water. A full glass. At once-ish (as in don't take a sip then set the glass down, drink the full glass.)

Why this works

This works on multiple levels. 1. It gives you redirection and something to focus on outside of what is triggering and/or upsetting you. 2. Drinking water helps to flush cortisol (stress hormone) out of your system. 3. Drinking water also causes your mouth to salivate, which stimulates a response in your brain that you are safe.

You can do this at any time. It also can help to relax you at bedtime and help to quiet your mind.

Modified Body Scan

Close your eyes and focus on tensing and relaxing each muscle group for two to three seconds each. Start with the feet and toes, then move up to the knees, thighs, glutes, chest, arms, hands, neck, jaw, and eyes—all while maintaining intentional, slow breaths.

Why this works

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This exercise works on many levels. One is you are turning your focus to a specific muscle group in your body and moving it from whatever is triggering you. Second the tensing and then releasing of your muscles relaxes them. Third, if you are counting your breath at the same time (or even if you aren't and are only focusing on tensing and releasing your muscles) you are keeping your frontal lobe engaged which allows us to remain in a place of both logic and empathy.

You can do this exercise anytime, sitting, standing or lying down. I highly recommend it as you are lying down to sleep to promote a sense of deep relaxation.

3-Count Breath

Breathe in through the nose, hold for a count of three while the muscles tense, then breathe out through the mouth on release.

Why this works

The breath work itself brings oxygen into our brain and body and on the exhale forces us to release and actually **breathe** and release the carbon dioxide we have stored in our bodies (I'm a breath holder myself, so sighs and exhales are always very important to help me relax). The counting portion keep the frontal lobe engaged and "on-line" not allowing us to continue being in a triggered state in the amygdala.

You can do this exercise at any time.

Mind Relaxation

Close your eyes. Breathe normally through your nose. As you exhale, silently say to yourself the word "one," or any other short word such as "peaceful," or a phrase such as "I feel quiet" or "I'm safe." Continue for 10 minutes. If your mind wanders, gently remind yourself to think about your breathing and your chosen word or phrase. Let your breathing become slow and steady.

Why this works

The breath work itself brings oxygen into our brain and body and on the exhale forces us to release and actually **breathe** and release the carbon dioxide we have stored in our bodies The word/phrase portion keep the frontal lobe engaged and "on-line" not allowing us to continue being in a triggered state in the amygdala.

You can do this exercise at any time.

Listing things

Start counting from one or naming all the colors you know or name all 50 States or all the countries in Europe or Africa or Asia or South America or all the capitols in Canada... Anything that is a list and that keeps your brain engaged and moves your focus from whatever is affecting in the moment.

Do **not** list things you need to do or are piling up or things that are stressing you out. List mundane things like listed above. You can also sit down and hand write out these lists (write out the numbers, countries, colors, shapes, etc). This will also help with moving your focus and has the added bonus of engaging your body.

Why this works

This engages the frontal lobe which causes our brain to move out of a triggered fight/flight/freeze response.

You can do this exercise at any time.

Big Body Movement

Do push-ups or jumping jacks or swing your arms in big circles. Do this for as long as you want/need.

Why this works

Big rigorous movements help to burn off cortisol that gets released into your body when under tremendous stress or anxiety. The movement can also cause the muscles to involuntarily shake which has been known to also release trauma from your body/system.

I recommend doing this exercise in the morning or mid-day and not at night near bed-time, as it can also be energizing.

Grounding

Sit on the ground or floor with your feet flat on the floor (knees bent) and palms of hands also flat on the floor. Focus on the connection between your feet, hands, and butt to the floor/ground. Notice textures, the pressure of the floor/ground pushing up on you and you pushing down on it.

Why this works

Connecting to the floor/ground in an intentional way helps our body and mind to feel centered and calm. Also turning our focus to mindfully notice the feeling of the floor/ground engages the frontal lobe.

You can do this exercise at any time.