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In his study Urs Meyers, who conducted the research on rats, snipped the afferent nerve fibres of the vagus, going from gut to brain, by doing so turned the two-way highway into a one-way street – preventing the brain from receiving messages from the gut. This allowed the researchers to look at the role the vagus plays in conveying gut instincts to the brain. Without the two-way communication of the vagus nerve between brain and gut rats showed a lower level of innate fear. Researchers concluded that an innate response to fear appears to be influenced significantly by “gut instinct” signals, sent from gut to brain.

Urs Meyers who conducted the research in ETH Zurich concluded, “We were able to show for the first time that the selective interruption of the signal path from the stomach to the brain changed complex behavioural patterns. This has traditionally been attributed to the brain alone. The study shows clearly that the stomach also has a say in how we respond to fear.”

It is therefore clear that the vagus nerve has powerful psychological influences on health and the restoration of health.

What can we as bodywork therapists do to facilitate down regulation of the vagus nerve?

My clinical experience has shown me that if we can create a really safe holding field, where we are truly grounded and present and if we listen with real compassion and presence, clients begin to feel safe and can begin to down regulate. As illustrated above, by reducing visceral vagal activation and by encouraging our clients to take long slow breaths, we begin to signal to the brain that we are safe; this simple exercise may be comforting, before coming into further techniques. By applying both of these simple, yet powerful techniques you will be accessing the full length of the vagus nerve. Be observant: notice the changes in voice, breathing, heart rate, visual expression, jaw clenching, cervical muscle tone and more.

To conclude, the viscera, particularly those served by the vagus nerve, transmit emotions, or “gut-instincts” back to the brain where they are interpreted. Healthy vagal communication between gut and brain can help to slow you down, this is likened to putting the car brakes on (something that in our hectic modern lives we all need at times). The neurotransmitter’s acetylcholine and GABA lower heart rate and blood pressure, which helps promote parasympathetic activity, enabling your heart and organs to slow down and therefore facilitating a rest and digest state. Something which I would say all clients need. Clients usually seek our help in times of stress, as all symptoms are exacerbated.

By consciously resting, receiving therapeutic treatment, or taking slow deep breaths for example we can change and down regulate vagal input from viscera to brain, which will be interpreted as a sign of safety, or a time to “rest and digest”. This creates an inner calm, which is essential for homeostasis and health. As an experienced bodywork practitioner, I have repeatedly witnessed this, but now research has shown this to be true. As bodywork practitioners we are fortunately well served to be able to help our clients with this understanding and by the simple, yet skilful use of our hands. Gentle, therapeutic myofascial or massage techniques, as demonstrated above can down regulate vagal activity, reducing fear and anxiety states.

References

- i) Gut Vagal Afferents Differentially Modulate Innate Anxiety and Learned Fear” published May 21, 2014 in the Journal of Neuroscience.
- ii) www.frontiersin.org

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