

((clear ripple))

by Michelle Thomson

October 19, 2022

A Sampling of Ways to Shift Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) States

Current research supports our autonomic nervous system (ANS) being the determinant of our body's basic feeling of safety or threat. Note, this physiological safety is different from us knowing we are safe. Anxiety indicates our ANS detects threats, even if we know we are safe at home.

Each of our nervous systems is different. Methods of shifting ANS states that work for me may not work for you. Below are some methods - many drawn from Dr. Stephen Porges and Deb Dana, LCSW. These may help you in finding ways that work for you to manage your ANS by strengthening your ability to ever more quickly recover your physiologically safe state – a calm, connected, curious, and alert mindset. It gives us a clear-minded, compassionate, relaxed presence.

A key skill is to become aware of when we are experiencing anxiety. One way to do that is to notice how we experience ANS activation. What happens in our body that signals us to label our experience anxiety? Maybe it's a tight stomach or a heaviness in the chest or a clenching of the jaw, etc?

Another key is to send our bodies conflicting signals highlighting the mismatch between its internal feelings of threat and real-world evidence of safety. Simply appreciating having air to breathe is one such cue. Some signs of a shift away from activation include sighing, yawning, salivating, swallowing, and relaxation.

Regularly practicing some of the ideas below over time will assist in our ability to regain ANS adaptability instead of being stuck in anxious states. Adaptability – the easy flow between ANS states, is a sign of autonomic nervous system health.

Some people get overwhelmed by anxiety. When this happens just focus on surviving it. We generally don't have access to practices disarming it at that point.

There are two sections below:

- I. **For any given moment or day** - includes quick and real-time practices
- II. **Over Time** - contains ideas that may require longer investments but may be more impactful.

This is a living document. There will be occasional additions and revisions.

NOTE: These practices are intended for everyday experiences of anxiety, not trauma.

((clear ripple))

October 19, 2022

A Sampling of Ways to Shift ANS states (cont.)

I. Any given moment or day:

- 1) *Co-regulation.*
 - a) Send cues of safety to others by using soft eyes, deep listening, a prosodic voice, and gentle face/head movements. This calms us at the same time.
 - b) Spend time with others who are able to send cues of safety.
- 2) *Willing hands.* This is an exercise suggested by Marsha Linehan, Phd. Simply turn palms facing outward when feeling frustration, resentment, or anything on the continuum of anger. Notice any changes in anger.
- 3) *Look sideways.* An exercise suggested by author and body therapist, Stanley Rosenberg, has us weave the fingers of one hand with those of the other and use them to gently cup the back of our head. Then with our eyes only, head straight, look as far to one side as we comfortably can. Hold for 30-60 seconds, or until you experience a sigh, a yawn or swallow. Then repeat looking to the other side.
- 4) *Breathwork* (only a few examples of many.)

While a direct route for changing autonomic states, certain of these can be dysregulating for some of us. Do until you feel an inner relaxation, or for 5 minutes.

 - a) Lengthen your exhalation – perhaps play with adding a sound to the exhale. Dr. Peter Levine suggests ‘Vuuuuu.’
 - b) Physiological sighing. Inhale, then inhale a little more. Exhale all at once.
 - c) Pranayama examples. Search videos for instructions.
 - Nadi Shodana
 - Bhramari - close your eyes, take an inhale, then for entire length of slow exhale make a low to medium humming noise. Try for 10 times.
 - d) Elicit joy - “Breathe and exhale slowly and deeply through your nose; your breathing is very regular, and your rib cage relaxed.” Research published in 2002 by neuroscientist Pierre Philippot et al. as shared by psychologist, Dr. Amy Cuddy.
- 5) *Reclaim your attention.* Narrowly focus on an object close to you – maybe on your desk, then soften the gaze to include surroundings. Also, follow a bird in the sky.
- 6) *Savoring practice.* Close your eyes. Bring to mind a cherished memory so vividly you feel a visceral reaction, such as a faint smile. Let the memory arise and fade on its own time. Don’t hang on. Repeat at least once a day for at least a couple weeks.

Memory ideas: a favorite walk on a beach, holding a newborn child, smelling lilacs, listening to waves on a beach, being in a cherished place, sharing an experience of wonder, or being held and holding a loved one, etc.

((clear ripple))

October 19, 2022

- 7) *Sound*. Set up playlists for each of the states, both safe and threatened.
The paradoxical effect of music helps explain our finding peace with mournful music, or safety with anxious music.
- 8) *Voice*. It broadcasts intentions.
 - a) Relax your vocal cords. Maybe check out warm-ups for singers.
 - b) Practice prosody – a musicality in your speaking voice.
- 9) *Neck*.
 - a) Lightly massage up and down the sides of your neck.
 - b) Draw gentle circles with two fingers in front of and two fingers in back of the ear, near the lobe. Go both directions.
- 10) *Ears*. Put two fingers in front and two behind each ear, then lightly rub up and down.
- 11) *Personal actions*. Each day, try doing:
 - a) One secret kindness for others - suggested by Steven Hayes, Phd.
 - b) One action aligned with your values.
- 12) *Benevolence practice*. A suggestion from Deb Dana, LCSW.
This is an active intentional generation and use of calm, curious, alert energy in the service of co-regulating our self and others.
 - a) Find the place inside body where you sense a stirring of the calm, curious, alert energy of kindness, perhaps in your heart, face, chest, or behind your eyes or elsewhere.
 - b) Notice where in the body the energy of kindness is born and settle into that space for a moment. What does this area feel like?
 - c) Stop and savor this state. Actively visualize using this energy for healing – in your mind’s eye, wrap it around your self and others thereby sending them care and compassion.
 - d) Visualize moving through the world in ventral vagal energy being a beacon of kindness, compassion, generosity, and friendship.
 - e) The nerves governing our eyes, ears, voice and face/head movements are influenced by the calm, curious, alert pathway. We can send cues of safety through them. We can check if we have access to:
 - Eyes – our capacity to relax our gaze or not.
 - Ears – our capacity for deep listening or not.
 - Note, some of these same listening circuits impact physical/mental health.
 - Voice – our capacity for prosody (musicality of voice) or not.
 - Voice broadcasts intentions.

((clear ripple))

October 19, 2022

- When at a loss for words, respond with ahh, ohh, humph, mmm (these are well understood affirmations across cultures.)
- Face and head movements – slight tilts (vs. stiff, straight heads), gentle moves.

13) *Visualization.*

- a) Visualize connecting to all aspects of ourselves – including anxiety, then expand the connection to all others, to all in our environment, and finally, to everything everywhere.
- b) Visualize moving through the world in ventral vagal energy being a beacon of kindness, compassion, generosity, and friendship.

14) *Nature.* Look at or be:

- in nature – water, mountains, forests, deserts, gardens, etc.
- with animals.

15) *Art.* Music, painting, drawing, sculpting, drafting, etc.

16) *Yoga.*

17) *Stretch.*

18) *Sit or stand with an upright, relaxed posture.* Consider “strong back/soft heart.”

19) *Play.*

20) *Bodywork.* Find what works for you – acupressure, acupuncture, massage, reiki, etc.

21) *Guided relaxation.* For example, non-sleep deep rest.

22) *Touch an object.* Notice the texture, temperature, colors, etc. Also use other senses – notice the subtleties of what you see, smell, listen, and taste.

23) *Hug.*

24) *Weighted blankets.* Sleep under them.

25) *Hot baths.*

26) *Joy.* Create and savor daily moments of joy.

((clear ripple))

October 19, 2022

A Sampling of Ways to Shift ANS states (cont.)

II. Over Time:

- 1) *Noticing*. This practice is suggested by therapist, Bruce Tift.
Imagine something that may trigger your anxiety. Bring your attention to your body sensation level with no interpretation. If you jump into the anxiety label, go back to noticing the sensations. With a light touch, ask if there is any evidence of harm if I stay embodied with my activation. If my throat is dry or my stomach is clenched, is there any evidence it is killing me? Any evidence it impacts who I am as a person? If there is none, we can take steps to actively relax our unnecessary threat response.

Note, it is generally our reactions to those sensations that cause us difficulties.

- 2) *Redefine anxiety*. Over time, we can try mentally redefining our anxious feelings as excitement, or as simply evidence of being alive.
- 3) *Anchors*. A practice suggested by Deb Dana, LCSW.
Find your calm, curious, alert anchors. These help us more easily return to or extend our stay in physiological safety. Do them as needed.
 - a) **Who** is a being around you that gives you feelings of safety and welcome? This can be a being known or unknown, alive or dead, human or animal or spiritual, etc.
 - b) **What** is a momentary activity you do that predictably gives you feeling of safety and welcome? Smelling flowers, look out windows, listen to music, sip tea, etc.
 - c) **Where** is a place to go or remember having gone that brings you a place of safety and welcome?
 - d) **When** is a time of day or year when you feel safe and welcome? Early mornings, Sundays, whenever there is fresh snow, etc.
- 4) *Hormesis*. Intentionally create activated states - anxiety, thru heat, cold, Wim Hof-type adrenaline inducing breathwork, etc., while focusing on remaining calm at the same time. Research supports this type of intentional, managed stress can increase our stress tolerance.
- 5) *Exercise*. Some types of movement can release some of the energy from a threatened activation and help shift us towards one of safety– trail running works for me.
- 6) *Gut health/Nutrition*. Consume adequate fiber, probiotics, check levels of Vitamin D, etc.
- 7) *Track HRV*. Heart rate variability is widely used by athletes to track their recovery from workouts. It is also a measure of the “health” of the autonomic nervous system.
- 8) *Check ins*. Periodically, check in to take a brief inventory of cues of safety and cues of danger in ourselves, in others, and in our environment.

A Sampling of Ways to Shift ANS states (cont.)

This supports a series of articles exploring anxiety. The essays will explore anxiety in our body, and its impacts on our decisions and our effectiveness. The articles already published are available here: www.clearripple.com.

Michelle Thomson is an executive coach and advisor whose clients include board directors, CEOs, senior executives, and other executive coaches. She specializes in high consequence, time-pressured situations. Michelle often brings them her background experiences as a portfolio manager, CEO, and board director, across industries including insurance, reinsurance, banking, and private investment firms. She is the founder of coaching and advisory firm, Clear Ripple, LLC.

Michelle is a Qualified Risk Director®, a Boardwise® certified board director, and affiliate partner of The DCRO Institute, a “global network bringing risk governance expertise to the boardroom and c-suite.” She is also a Charter Angel of the over 15,000 members strong, 100 Women in Finance, and a professional ski instructor volunteering with Ignite Adaptive Sports. To reach Michelle, please go to her website, www.clearripple.com.
