

SIMPLE IDEAS

...to aid self-regulation during the day

(This is not how to “hack” your vagus nerve!)

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These are simple activities that help your whole being, and especially your primitive physiology to come into a more self-regulated state.

The body optimises itself all the time given half a chance, and these are simple ways to give it half a chance.

They are all “hacks” in the sense that if you use them superficially they can create a temporary “fix” that helps you to feel a bit better or survive a particular situation. It’s always useful to have a quick fix in your toolbox of possible responses to the world! Almost all of them also have deeper versions that have a more profound and permanent effect. However, more long-lasting applications require a very different mindset¹, and so are not the subject of this short paper.

You might already be using some of these methods, perhaps without realising it!

In fact, almost everyone knows several “hacks” that help them feel better or be more functional. But some of the most common quick fixes are addictions, so also have drawbacks. This list is an invitation to explore the more self-nurturing things you might already be doing in a way that might make them more effective; and also an invitation to try out different methods. If something works for you – that’s great. Some will work really well and others not at all. So just pick the ones that are useful for you and keep the rest in mind – because they might be of use some time in the future.

¹ Critical, dismissive, “hacking”, fixing, interfering, suppressive forms of attention and response (i.e. TRYING to make things change) get in the way of that deeper biology, or will turn the exercise into a meaningless ritual. Sometimes “fixing it” works for a while. But in the long term it is not a good way to use these techniques - because in many cases they will simply stop working.

All of these work best if they are familiarised – i.e. you become curious what effect they have on your mental state and on how you feel in your body. If you become very familiar with the sensory & mental space “texture” of a resourced state by practising it when you feel “good”, then when you need it in a real situation, it is a familiar (and therefore easier) place to go.

In exploring these, there is a 40-50 second settling time - *in which you become curiously aware of how your body has responded* - followed by a processing/marinating time that is particularly beneficial. This marinating time makes them MUCH more effective! So CURIOSITY is a really important skill to make sure you stay with the experience for more than 40-50 seconds! Putting that in a bit more detail... There is always a “what?” (sensation/movement response/mental quality) and a “where” (the geography of the response).

See the “**Positive Body Awareness**” and “**Body Integration**” documents² for more comments about the importance of curiosity, and about the idea of “*What?*” and “*Where?*”.

² https://www.body-mind.co.uk/a_resources/docs.html

SELF-REGULATORY ACTIVITIES

There is (1) **Down-regulation** (becoming more calm, focussed, peaceful, spacious, less reactive, less agitated) and (2) **Up-regulation** (becoming more embodied, physically present, aware of yourself and your body, less dizzy, less spacey, less tired).

Some activities do both – because they tend to bring you into a homeostatic optimum (the middle of the working range of your nervous system).

Up-Down-Regulation (which direction depends where you start)

- **Singing in a group of people** – or just singing loudly and joyfully. The specific song can make a lot of difference. It should ideally be a song/tune that opens your heart. You can sing the words, or “Aaaa” or “Oooo” or “Laaa” without words. A few possible suggestions :
 - Nina Simone - Feelin' Good <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5Y1hwjMNs>
 - Paul Simon - Graceland https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9P-Zuq_ypo
 - Queen - We are the champions <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04854XqcfCY>
 - Sting - Fields of Gold <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UVjjcOUJLE> and Fragile <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQGkzqtQiOI>
 - Dougie Maclean - Ready for the Storm <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPSDu2y9FD8>
 - Weather Girls - It's raining men <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5aZIBLAuIE>
 - Holst - Jupiter <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gu77Vtja3oc>
- **Humming**, and allowing a tune to humm itself. Particularly humming with your ears underwater in a warm bath! Also singing (see previous) with ears underwater.
- Watching and “**logging**” whatever you see or hear. *There's a bird. There's a red van. There's a cloud, There's the sound of a dog barking...* (mentally logging each detail and being interested in any detail of each one³).
- Watching rainbows in washing up soap bubbles (or in fact **engaging in any simple everyday beauty**)...
- Sitting on a bench outside, feel breath, feel air, notice sounds, sky (being present, time-spacious)
- Wiggling toes (here are my toes...!)

3 An external version of Gendlin's “Focussing”

- Hugging yourself / pushing on legs / firmly but gently rubbing the arms and legs and shoulders / other forms of self-contact. It is particularly useful exploring and amplifying self-contacts and movements that you find yourself making unconsciously.... *What are these doing (unconscious movements always have a self-corrective purpose)? How can I engage with them to increase what they are doing? How is this progressing into different feelings/energised states/movements/other forms of contact?*
- Balance board – engaging many senses and movement reflexes at the same time
- Cold water (face) splash/wash/submerge your face in cold water.
- More Organic food, naturally fermented foods (e.g. sauerkraut) and less refined sugars. Earth-contact – gardening, sleeping outdoors, lying on the Earth. These all help the gut microbiome to be in a better ecological balance by encouraging beneficial bacteria and creating a more welcoming environment for the internal ecology.
- Earth-contact – gardening, sleeping outdoors, lying on the Earth, walking barefoot, smelling the vegetation, the soil, the air. There is a different rhythm when in a natural environment compared to a constructed environment. It sometimes takes some time to acclimatise to this, so initial responses may be uncomfortable or very sleepy, and this transition time may be over a week of sleeping outdoors... However, even small exposures of this kind are useful.
- Mid-range muscle engagement – push or grasp lightly, but not too lightly, not too strongly. There is a middle level of effort at which you have maximum {sensitivity + physical engagement + perceptual/mental engagement}. Finding some surface or object (a chair?) that you can use to push against and get a sense of your own physical strength, and of being “met”
- Dance – especially dance in community, and (!) *folk dancing*
- *Rhythm. Of course, singing and dancing include rhythm. There is a great demonstration of the use of rhythm to get to sleep at <https://jim-donovan.mykajabi.com/blog/how-to-trick-your-brain-into-falling-asleep>*
- *Physical contact with pets/animals/(?trees?/grass?) – (Q. what makes pet contact possibly more regulating than human contact?)*
- *Two-handed drawing – use both hands at the same time*

- Short-burst or mixed fast-slow physical exertion (e.g. games of “tag”, martial arts, many kinds of sports – such as skiing, badminton/squash/tennis, football, etc etc).
- Long distance running.
- Containment : This is about feeling your own physical presence. If you are Hyper and need down-regulation, containment probably needs to be a way of expressing your strength against a resistance (such as wrestling) whilst at the same time knowing that you will NOT be pinned down and prevented from moving!
- Direction orientation with the head and senses – turn neck, turn eyes to explore your environment – all VERY slowly, consciously noticing the safety (to be used in a controlled space indoors, not in a public space). This works best if you are in a position where you have a visual command of the whole room including the entrances.
- **Breathe out through the mouth to completely empty your lungs**, and get rid of stale air... Enjoy the emptying, sinking sensation of the long exhalation. Keep breathing out until the lungs are so empty that they automatically breathe themselves in. Pause. Exhale fully again... Do this at least 3X, but no more than 9X, and then allow the breath to find its own rate and motion and depth. Observe that new breath pattern for a minute or so. Also see extended breath notes below.
- Chew gum or some other object... ever wondered why people used to walk round with a straw in their mouths or kids chew the ends of pencils? The production of saliva feeds back into the nervous system and tells your body you must be safe – because you’re eating. (NB – chewing gum / sucking on a grass straw is non-fattening – actually eating that much is probably not a good idea!)
- **Remember that relaxation is not always good.** The way out of “Hyper” states is through the whole body-mind-sensory system feeling safe and in control-enough during **hyper**-arousal. So a useful thing to experiment with is pretending to be a predator such as a wolf or a lion surveying your territory. Watching a herd of its prey. Where would you sit/stand? How does your body express that alert yet relaxed engagement with the world? If you try to suppress Hyper states during real stressful events by deliberately relaxing, that can lead to all kinds of problems. It is better to rise to meet any challenges and then down-regulate naturally from that point when it is safe to do so. If you do a reality check and KNOW that you are excessively Hyper for the particular situation, then rather than trying to

suppress the Hyper, fully live it, allow your body to move, and then start to be curious what in your environment tells you that you are safe. “What else is there?” is a very useful question.

- *(more will be added occasionally)*

CO₂/Oxygen balance

When CO₂ (Carbon dioxide) is chronically low, (*e.g. due to overbreathing [excess focus on inhalation], hyperventilation, and patterns of breathing associated with anxiety, trauma or stress*), the oxygen gets stuck on the haemoglobin of the red blood cells. Whilst the blood may be saturated with O₂ (Oxygen), if there is a low CO₂ content it can't move easily into the tissues of the body or exchange in the lungs, resulting in all sorts of chronic health issues and symptoms. One of which is chronic anxiety. This is one of the many metabolic-emotional feedback loops in the body.

Anxiety → rapid shallow inhalation-focussed breaths → CO₂ depletion

CO₂ depletion → anxiety

rapid shallow breaths → anxiety

Free divers and elite athletes will have a high CO₂ tolerance (ability to breathe steadily out for over 40 seconds). Fast/shallow breathing patterns associated with trauma and chronic stress will typically have a very low CO₂ tolerance (ability to sustain an out-breath is less than 10 seconds). The low CO₂ levels become normalised in parts of the homeostatic control, and so attempts to reverse it can result in a temporary increase in anxiety until the body re-habituates to a more efficient O₂/CO₂ ratio.

A low CO₂ tolerance can mean we get stuck in a negative feedback loop resulting in perpetually poor oxygenation to our tissue, causing all sorts of physical symptoms and chronic health conditions, and issues including anxiety/stress. Due to chronic over-breathing, our bodies have become habituated to low CO₂ levels in the blood, yet any attempt to increase the levels of CO₂ through slowing down our breathing results in the medulla alarm signals going off immediately, causing autonomic re-acceleration of breathing, through feelings of suffocation and panic states.

There are MANY different breath exercises that can have quite profound effects. One recommended by Leon Chaitow is ...

Anti-arousal Breathing Exercise

Place yourself in a comfortable (ideally seated/reclining) position, exhale FULLY through your partially open mouth, lips just barely separated. This outbreath should be performed slowly. Imagine that a candle flame is about 6 inches from your mouth and exhale (blowing a thin stream of air) in such a way as to not blow the candle out. As you exhale, count silently to yourself to establish the length of the outbreath [or use a stopwatch app on phone]. After exhaling fully, without any sense of strain, allow the next inhalation to be full, free and uncontrolled [through nose]. Count to yourself to establish how long your inhalation lasts. Without pausing to hold the breath, exhale FULLY, through the mouth, blowing the air in a thin stream (again you should count to yourself at the same speed). Many people find a brief (one second) pause at the end of the exhalation helps to establish an unhurried rhythm.

Continue to repeat the inhalation [through nose] and the exhalation for not less than 30 cycles of in and out (with a one second pause after breathing out). The objective is that in time – after some weeks of practising this daily – you should, without strain, achieve an inhalation phase which lasts for 2–3 seconds while the exhalation phase lasts from 6–7 seconds. Most importantly, the exhalation should be slow and continuous. It is no use breathing the air out in 2 seconds and then simply waiting until the count reaches 6, 7 or 8 before inhaling again. By the time you have completed 15 or so cycles, a sense of calm is frequently apparent. Apart from practising this once or twice daily, it may be useful to repeat the exercise for a few minutes (about five cycles of inhalation/exhalation takes a minute) if you feel anxious or ‘stressed’.

Chaitow, Leon (2013) Recognizing and Treating Breathing Disorders Publ. Elsevier

(2) Another simpler breathing exercise that has a lot of research validation (being used by many athletes, executives and armed forces, etc...) :

Place yourself in a comfortable position, vertical (sitting/standing)

*Drop into a **10 second** breath cycle : 4 in, 1 pause, 4 out, 1 pause for at least 3 minutes, preferably up to 10 minutes*

The in-breath should be through the nose

The out-breath should be (a) through the nose, OR (b) through the mouth using a “HAAAHH” mouth shape (i.e. NOT a HU or a pursed lip/whistling shape)

(Refs : HeartMath, and “Slow Paced Breathing)

The FOUR FEEL-GOOD Neurotransmitters

There are four major neurotransmitters that reflect different states of wellbeing. Many of these suggestions activate more than one of them. These super activities are given a ✨

1. DOPAMINE : The reward chemical

Most people have an excess of dopamine because they are engaged in trivial social media or other addictive activities. However, if that isn't you, ways to increase dopamine include :

Completing a task and patting yourself on the back for it! Well done! ✨

Celebrating any other small (or large) things that go well in your life

Eating - especially warming food suited to the time of day. More protein is better in the morning, Higher carbohydrate foods are better in the evening. Chicken soup !

Looking after yourself, and being looked after

2. SEROTONIN : The mood stabiliser

Ways to increase serotonin include :

Meditation / prayer

Breathing / slow exercises such as Yoga, Pilates and TaiChi

Running, swimming, cycling. Dancing. Also burst exercises (run-walk-run-walk etc) that are similar to the movement patterns children have during play.

Walk in Nature - Especially in quiet heartfelt company. ✨

Dancing and/or singing in a group ✨

Eating Tryptophan-rich foods ; chicken, eggs, cheese/dairy, fish, peanuts, bananas, pumpkin and sesame seeds, turkey.

3. OXYTOCIN : The “Love hormone”

also comes with DHEA – the longevity hormone. Ways to increase oxytocin include :

Playing with a dog or other animal ✱

Playing with a baby or children or someone you love

Holding someone’s hand, or hugging (when both of you are OK with this!)

Giving someone a genuinely heartfelt complement ✱

Appreciating / being grateful for simple things – such as a tree, or the sky (see notes on page 1) ✱

4. ENDORPIN(s) : Natural opioid/cannabinoid painkillers

Ways to increase endorphins include :

Laughter. Some people do this by watching old black and white films by Buster Keaton (etc). Certain comedians – e.g. Morecambe and Wise, Ken Dodd, Tommy Cooper – have the ability to make people laugh whilst not being mean to anyone else in the process! ✱

Nice smells – rose, hyacinth, cedar trees, etc. This is also available using essential oils (or a walk in the woods! ✱

Dark chocolate (>70%)

Aerobic exercise

Cold water

SELF REGULATION FROM HYPO STATES :

Up-Regulation (for people stuck in dissociation or “playing dead” or states of floppy lassitude)

(Thanks to the Facebook Vagus Study Group)

This is not so easy as general regulation, so the thing to do is give yourself time and approach it more as a curious exploration. The most important general rule is to learn to trust your impressions. Hypo states are dissociative and therefore tend to (a) numb out the senses, making it more difficult to be aware at all, and (b) create several mental states that are difficult to manage.

The most common experiences are :

1. Hypersensitivity / permeability to the environment and other people's emotions (or even their thoughts), Woozy drifty feelings. In this case the most useful "hacks" are learning how to discriminate yourself from everything else, and how to ground.
2. Reduced sensitivity : Numbness, blankness, cardboardy depersonalisation or derealisation, darkness, low energy, lassitude (floppy de-energised muscles). In this case the problem is “coming home” – being able to make contact again with yourself and the world.
3. Powerful and profoundly enervating emotions – terror, despair, hopelessness, shame, self-blame, grief, self-loathing, self-disgust. In this case it's important to find a different focus, particularly on things of beauty that give you a sense of peace and hope.

There are also different depths to which these states can take hold. **If you can catch Hypo-states before they really grab hold of you, then it's a lot easier.**

Whatever I say from this point is always contingent, because we are all so different, and there are NO general rules that suit or apply to everyone.

I know that in theory it's possible to accept Hypo states and go deep enough to find a rabbit hole through which you can emerge on the other side. This deep level of acceptance is not impossible, but it not easy, and certainly a topic covered in this document. However, as a general principle, if you can fully find some space and time to allow the hypo state to do its thing (by not fighting it,

but rather accepting it and then gently redirecting your attention), very often it will come to an end all by itself.

Trying to push your way out of Hypo states is often counter-productive. Focussing on how bad they feel is also not productive, and often leads to an escalation.

Anything that you use to come out of Hypo states might feel like a small effort initially, but then it will soon start to begin to bring out a little more energy or engagement with the world. If it continues to feel like an effort or feels like it is making you feel worse - then you should try a different approach, or come back later and try the same approach but in a much smaller dose!

If the Hypo states have become quite strong, then the starting point is obviously different and the approach has also got to be slightly different. Small steps at a time work much better than trying to do it all at once, so a little patience and trust is required! If the Hypo is strong, what many people find is that the fuses blow if there is a connection with too much energy or embodied presence too quickly. Therefore it's useful to recognise that some of them might work very well, but you get the most out of them by only doing a little bit at a time, gradually helping your body to tolerate being energised or awake.

In the list below, the symbol ¶ means that this method was described in a little more detail in the Up-regulation section above.

- **Positive Body Awareness** protocol at https://www.body-mind.co.uk/a_resources/docs.html
- Fresh air, sunlight. ¶ Feel them on your skin. If there is a cold breeze, stay warm, but also close your eyes and feel the air on your face. *Vitamin D (get some advice on dosage so that you don't take too much) or artificial sunlight ("light box").*
- **Singing in a group of people** – or just singing loudly and joyfully. ¶ **Humming**, and allowing a tune to humm itself. ¶
- Watching rainbows in washing up soap bubbles (or in fact **engaging in any simple everyday beauty**)... ¶
- Wiggling toes (here are my toes...!) ¶
- Hugging yourself / pushing on legs / firmly but gently rubbing the arms and legs and shoulders / other forms of self-contact. ¶

- Cold water (face) splash/wash/submerge your face in cold water. ¶ Cold water swimming.
- More Organic food and Earth-contact ¶ A couple of dandelion leafs every day or about an inch of dandelion stalk can help clean out the liver, which may be helpful. Other herbs for the liver – such as milk thistle – can also be useful. Learn something about simple easily accessible herbs that you can forage for yourself.
- Finding some surface or object (a chair? a wall?) that you can use to push against and get a sense of your own physical strength, and of being “met”
- Any physical movement, particularly outdoors, particularly hip movements. Dance – especially dance in community, and (!) *folk dancing*
- Playing catch with a ball or something similar. Juggling.
- Social contact where you can just be in someone’s presence without having to respond to them or having to be different (which is why pets and animals are so good at helping us to regulate). *Physical contact with pets / animals/(?trees?/grass?)*
- A hot drink – hold the cup and feel the heat on your hands. Snuggling up, hot water bottle.
- Containment – tight clothes / weighted blanket / warm cozy blanket vs unconstrained : And perhaps also exploring the transition from the one you feel most alive in to the one you feel least comfortable with. This is about feeling your own physical presence.
- **Breathe out through the mouth to completely empty your lungs**, and get rid of stale air... Enjoy the emptying, sinking sensation of the long exhalation. Keep breathing out until the lungs are so empty that they automatically breathe themselves in and fill. Pause. Exhale fully again... ¶ Also see extended breath notes above.
- Chew gum or some other object... ¶
- Comedy videos – I particularly recommend Ken Dodd, Morecambe and Wise, Tommy Cooper – because their humour is not nasty to anyone, and is based heavily on body language and timing. Also some of the old black and white comedy films such as Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin.

- Try out different kinds of music and find what helps you to feel uplifted and energised. Make your own playlist. If your body responds by moving when you don't tell it to move (!) - don't suppress it! Join in with your body and keep moving. Music is very powerful, and whilst heavy rock might provide an immediately energised feeling, it also tends to increase numbing. Similarly, the minor keys that dominate country music tend to be a little depressive, and can sometimes lead to too much introspection.
- Recognise you have a choice of where you place your attention. Hypo states tend to have a certain suction to them, and so it is usually useful to find a sense of presence by first using your external senses with curiosity to settle more firmly into your "external" environment. This is described more fully in "[Positive Body Awareness](#)"
- Doing something you've never done before and paying attention to it - new food, music, place, activity etc. Art (joining an art class is one way to have regulated social contact and to express yourself)
- Yoga or Taiji can be useful for some people. Particularly classes that are based on being focused on a lot of detail in quality of movement and limb position.
- **Remember that relaxation is not always good.** The way out of "Hypo" states is always through the whole body-mind-sensory system first going into some degree of **hyper**-arousal. So a useful thing to experiment with is pretending to be a predator such as a wolf or a lion surveying your territory. Watching a herd of its prey. Where would you sit/stand? How does your body express that alert yet relaxed engagement with the world?
- Find out a little about the geology of your area. Not just the immediate geology (the soft sediments and the first layer of rock) but see if you can find a geological section so you know what is still deeper... Then be aware of those very deep old rocks a long way beneath your feet as you stand on the ground.
- Bilateral drawing - practice using the hand that you DON'T normally use. Start with big felt tip pens, and as you get better at it, progress to drawing fine lines.
- Diet and hydration. Dehydration or too much sugar can lead to blood sugar deficiency, leading to feelings of weakness, tiredness, incapacity, lassitude and sometimes irritation. More protein, especially in the morning, helps to balance blood sugar. Carbs should preferably NOT be refined flours or refined sugars, but rather come from more complex sources such as fruit (NOT juice) or vegetables. Nicotine (including nicotine patches),

and caffeine (including black tea and “energy” drinks”) force your blood sugar to go high, so they may also cause a rebound effect where it later plummets. Artificial sweeteners are worse, in that they tend to create excessive hunger and exhaustion. Sweet fizzy or bottled drinks contain sweeteners and sugars in vast quantities, so the simplest thing you can do to help yourself is to stop drinking them. Diet is a huge topic.

- (more will be added occasionally)