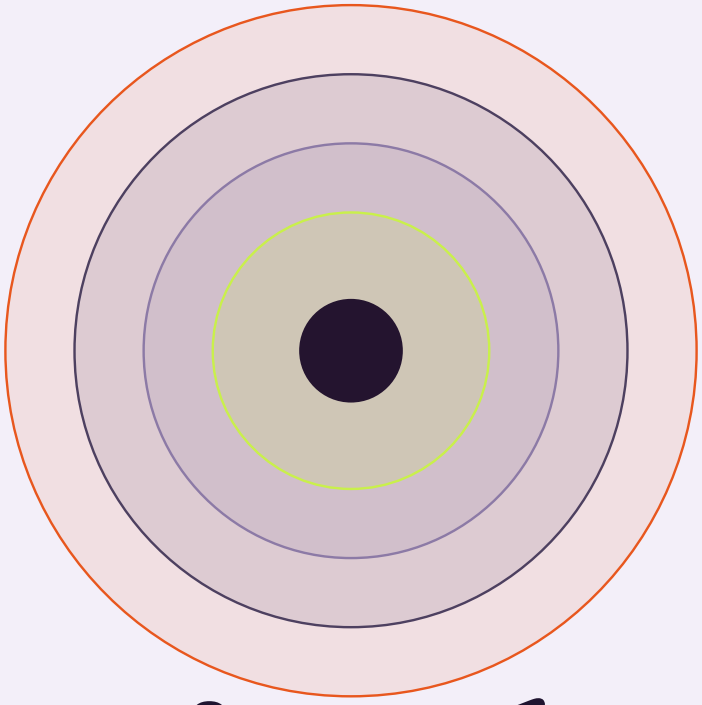


Accessing the Healing Power of the Vagus Nerve: Self-Help Exercises for Anxiety, Depression,

Trauma, and Autism

A reading of the book by Stanley Rosenberg (2017)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Accessing the Healing Power of the Vagus Nerve: Self-Help Exercises for Anxiety, Depression, Trauma, and Autism, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Stanley Rosenberg is an American body therapist based in Denmark, trained in craniosacral therapy and Rolfing structural integration. The book builds on Stephen Porges's polyvagal theory, which describes three states of the autonomic nervous system: social engagement through the ventral branch of the vagus nerve, fight or flight through the sympathetic nervous system, and shutdown through the dorsal branch of the vagus. Rosenberg argues that many chronic problems, from anxiety and low mood to migraines and neck pain, involve being stuck outside the social engagement state. His main tools are short self-help exercises, chiefly the Basic Exercise, in which you move only your eyes to one side with your hands behind your head, and the salamander exercises, which add a side bend of the head or spine. He links them to the five cranial nerves that Porges ties to social engagement, and illustrates them with case stories from his practice. Polyvagal theory is debated among neuroscientists, and the evidence for the exercises is mostly clinical experience rather than controlled trials.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Your nervous system has three settings, not two: settled and social, revved up for fight or flight, and shut down.

Rosenberg builds on Stephen Porges's polyvagal theory, which adds a third state to the familiar picture of stress versus relaxation. In the theory, the dorsal branch of the vagus can slow the body right down when a threat feels inescapable. The calm, connected state is called ventral vagal.

2

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

When the body feels safe, the face, the voice and the ears switch on together.

Following Porges, Rosenberg ties social engagement to five cranial nerves that serve the face, jaw, throat, middle ear and the muscles that turn the head. That is why a flat face, a monotone voice and trouble following speech in a noisy room can show up together. It is also why he works on the face and neck to change how safe the body feels.

3

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A small eye movement can be a way into the nervous system.

The Basic Exercise asks you to lace your fingers behind your head, keep your head still and move only your eyes to one side until you yawn, swallow or sigh, then repeat on the other side. Rosenberg presents it as a quick way to shift toward the social engagement state. The support for it is mainly his clinical experience and reports from people who have tried it.

4

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A yawn, a swallow or a sigh is a signal worth noticing.

Rosenberg treats these as signs that the autonomic nervous system is shifting during an exercise. So instead of only counting seconds, you wait for one of them before moving on. It is a useful cue to pay attention to your body, not a measurement.

5

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Fight or flight is not the bottom of the stress response; shutdown sits beneath it.

Polyvagal theory arranges the states in order: the body tries social engagement first, then fight or flight, and falls back on shutdown when neither works. Rosenberg uses this to explain why some people under strain go flat, foggy and withdrawn rather than anxious. Seen this way, low energy is not laziness but a state with its own logic.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Posture and nervous state talk to each other, and the neck is where they meet.

Rosenberg pays close attention to forward head posture and to tight trapezius and sternocleidomastoid muscles, which are served by the eleventh cranial nerve. In his view, freeing the neck and bringing the head back over the body helps breathing and social engagement. The salamander exercises are part of how he works on this.

7

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Judge an exercise by what you notice in your own body, not by the theory behind it.

The book is full of case stories, but your own experience is the test that matters to you. Noting your state before and after, and any yawn or sigh, turns a vague attempt into a small experiment. If nothing changes after a fair try, that is worth knowing too.

8

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The three states make a useful map even while scientists argue over the territory.

Polyvagal theory is debated, and some neuroscientists dispute parts of it, including Porges's account of how the branches of the vagus evolved and what each one does. Rosenberg presents the theory with confidence. You can use the three states as a language for what you feel without treating every physiological claim as proven.

9

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Self-help exercises belong beside professional care, not in place of it.

The subtitle names anxiety, depression, trauma and autism, and the case stories describe striking changes. These are Rosenberg's reports from his own practice. Anyone living with those conditions should keep working with their clinician and treat the exercises as something gentle to add.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Learn the Basic Exercise lying down
- [ ] Pick your before-and-after check
- [ ] Describe your three states in your own words
- [ ] Try the half salamander sitting down
- [ ] Tell your clinician what you are trying

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Do two minutes before a hard conversation
- ◯ Note your state before and after
- ◯ Meet a flat day with gentle movement

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Learn the Basic Exercise lying down

Lie on your back, lace your fingers behind your head and keep your head still.

Move only your eyes to the right and hold for 30 to 60 seconds, or until you yawn, swallow or sigh. Bring your eyes back to centre, then do the left side.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Pick your before-and-after check

Choose one thing you can notice in a few seconds: how far your head turns comfortably to each side, how your breath feels, or how heavy your shoulders are.

Check it before and after each exercise.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Describe your three states in your own words

Write one line each for how settled, revved up and shut down feel in your body.

Plain words of your own are easier to recognise in the middle of a busy day.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Try the half salamander sitting down

Sit upright and look to one side with your eyes only.

Then tilt your head so that ear moves toward the same shoulder, without turning your face, and hold for 30 to 60 seconds. Come back to centre and repeat on the other side, and stop if anything hurts.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Tell your clinician what you are trying

If you see a doctor, therapist or physiotherapist, mention the exercises, especially if you have neck problems, dizziness or a heart condition.

Ask whether anything should be adapted for you.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Do two minutes before a hard conversation

Before a difficult call, meeting or talk, find a quiet spot and do the Basic Exercise on both sides.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Note your state before and after

Each time you do an exercise, write down which of the three states you started in and ended in.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Meet a flat day with gentle movement

When you feel heavy and foggy rather than anxious, start with something small and physical, such as a short walk or the half salamander, before anything demanding.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
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30 ○						

December 2026

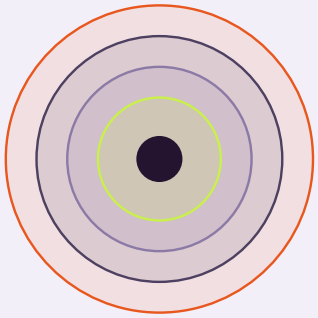
MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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7	8	9	10	11	12	13
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Notice which state you are in, then give your body a small, gentle way back to feeling safe.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER STANLEY ROSENBERG

Read it online, and vote on the take-aways: hourlife.com/books/accessing-the-healing-power-of-the-vagus-nerve

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HourLife,
hourlife.com