



Brain-Gut Connection



acaciaEAP
employee assistance program

We may recall, as a young person, our parents and grandparents referring to someone as having a nervy or nervous disposition or having a nervous stomach. We know this to be anxiety, stress, or depression.

While those of older generations may not have fully understood the connection between our gut and brain, they were right! Over the past few decades, research within the fields of psychology and psychiatry has discovered a strong link between the gut and the brain. This link, often referred to as the gut-brain axis, is the vagus nerve.

The Vagus Nerve

The vagus nerve is the longest nerve in your body, connecting your brain to important organs, such as the intestines, stomach, heart, and lungs. The vagus nerve is also known as the rest and digest nervous system, and plays an important role in breathing, digestion, and heart rate via the parasympathetic nervous system.

Research shows that good vagal tone reduces symptoms of mood and anxiety disorders, PTSD, ADHD, autism, and Alzheimer's Disease, to name a few. The vagus nerve is also connected to our immune system.

Many psychological and psychiatric conditions are perceived by our vagus nerve as inflammation, resulting in the production of cytokine cells. Being a normal response, these cells act to combat inflammation. However, too many cytokine cells produced over long-term unresolved anxiety, for example, may be responsible for symptoms of brain fog, sleeplessness and fatigue.

Supporting Brain-Gut Connection

So, how do we support a healthy brain-gut connection and improve our mental wellbeing?

Nutrition

Nutrition is vital for good brain-gut connection and improved mental wellbeing. A diet of predominantly freshly prepared whole foods containing balanced healthy fats and is high in fibre, antioxidants, and omega-3, such as the Mediterranean diet, provides essential micronutrients. It has also been found to improve cognitive decline, anxiety, and depression.

Our diet should contain foods, or probiotic supplements, that ensure adequate good gut bacteria such as *Lactobacillus rhamnosus*. These are found to improve brain function facilitated by the vagus nerve, which can reduce stress hormones and symptoms of anxiety and depression.



Meditation, Grounding, and Mindfulness

In our busy lives, we may believe that we don't have time to care for ourselves. However, ten minutes each day may be all we need to sit in silence, immerse our senses in the natural world, and engage in self-care.

Incorporating deep, focused breathing combined with imagery is a simple but effective way to reduce stress and alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression. By relaxing muscles around our neck, shoulders, thorax, and abdomen, we can improve vagal tone and clarity of mind.

Being mindful, without judgement in all we do, can help us eliminate unhelpful thoughts, which are often the catalyst for anxiety and depression.

"Your gut and brain are connected physically through millions of nerves, most importantly the vagus nerve."

Socialising and laughter

Good exercise for our vagus nerve, laughter and socialising has been found to support good vagal tone. This is similar to deep breathing by stimulating the vagus nerve, moving surrounding muscles, and increasing the production of 'feel good' endorphins.

Taking back control

Anxiety and depression may cause us to feel like we have no control. Our thoughts determine our actions. Understanding that we have the power over our thoughts and actively working to challenge them with the help of a mental health professional, can help us to be our best selves and live our best life.

Final Words

There are many ways we can support the development of a healthy brain-gut connection to foster good mental wellbeing. If you need support, though, you are not alone – Acacia is available 24/7 to support you in building your brain-gut connection.

Robertson, Ruairi, (2023), [The Gut-Brain Connection: How it Works and The Role of Nutrition](#)

