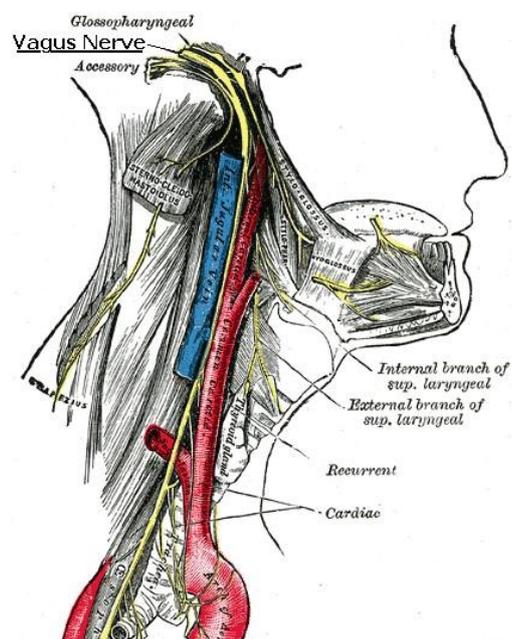




THE PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

Our bodies are designed to keep us alive, and they do this incredibly well. When we perceive a threat we instantly snap into ‘fight-or-flight’ mode. ‘Fight-or-flight’ mode (also known as hyperarousal) is largely controlled by the sympathetic nervous system, and it’s aim is to react to threat or attack and ensure our survival. A wave of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenalin are released, which suppress processes such as digestion and the immune system in favour of those that are more likely to serve us in the moment, such as releasing energy to the muscles in our arms and legs. This reaction mechanism is ideal when faced with a dangerous animal, for example, but is less necessary in most of our lives today.



These days we are more likely to be triggered into hyperarousal by a stressful job, a busy commute, exams etc, but our inbuilt reaction mechanism is the same. Unlike encountering a dangerous animal, though, these stresses tend to be ongoing. Staying in fight-or-flight for an extended period of time can lead to a variety of health and mental health issues, as a result of the continuous presence of stress hormones, and the on-going prioritising of potentially lifesaving processes over digestion, immune responses, mental processing and so on. These issues include chronic stress, anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, brain fog, and digestive issues such as indigestion or IBS—to name but a few.

The parasympathetic nervous system works in harmony with the sympathetic nervous system, and controls our ‘rest-and-digest’ state. Counterbalancing ‘fight-or-flight’ mode, ‘rest-and-digest’ does just that— allows the body to function normally, process information, digest, and heal. A key part of the parasympathetic nervous system is the vagus nerve, which runs to most of the major organs in the body. This nerve runs through the thorax and can be stimulated by singing. The breathing, warmups, and music at Birch Tree Folk Choir are specially designed and selected to activate the ‘rest-and-digest’ state, and so works to mitigate the over-stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system, which leads to so many issues today.