

P.O.R.T.A.L.S. to your nervous system

Our nervous systems are constantly monitoring our feelings and environments and making adjustments to keep us safe and our bodies moving. We are often unaware of these adjustments as they happen. This is a good thing, because it would be overwhelming to have to think about all of these endless processes. Even so, we can tune in to our bodies' responses if we choose to.

When we sense danger, there are many immediate physical effects. Our heart rates speed up and our muscles tense. These are the right responses to immediate physical threats that require us to run away or fight back, but many of the things that cause us stress in our day to day lives are not things we can—or should—run away from.



We may also have experienced physical danger in the past, causing our bodies to react in a similar way even in situations where we are not under threat.

Due to the stress of living in a society that can be difficult to navigate as a trans, Two-Spirit, or non-binary person, many of us learn to live most of our lives with an enhanced sensitivity to potential danger.

This resource suggests strategies for showing gratitude to our bodies for the work they put into keeping us safe, while also being able to let our bodies know when it's okay to return to calm. You can try these techniques when you are feeling stressed, or practice them when you are already calm to build familiarity.

Some body responses happen automatically, but we can learn to influence them consciously. These are like doorways (or “portals”) to communicate with our nervous system. You can think of this as talking to your nervous system in its own language.

You can use **P. O. R. T. A. L. S.** as a mnemonic device to help you remember some tools for communication between your mind and your body:

- P** is for Pelvic floor
- O** is for Opening and closing the eyes
- R** is for Regulating breath
- T** is for Toes and fingers, hands and feet
- A** is for Aaaahhh
- L** is for Look and listen
- S** is for Saliva



We'll go through each of these in the pages that follow.

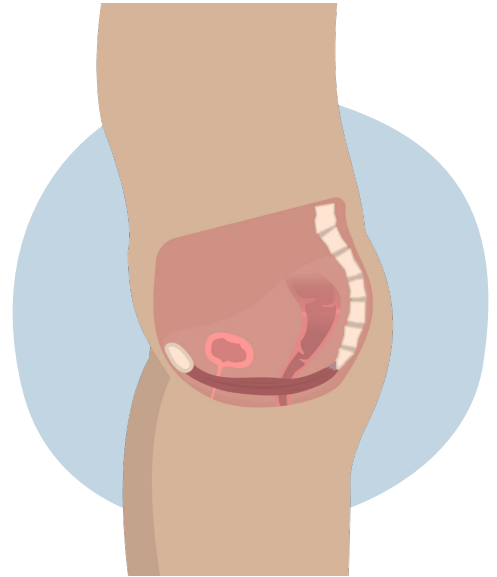
P is for Pelvic floor

In response to stressors, we subconsciously brace for action. The pelvic floor is involved in this process. If we experience a lot of stressors, our pelvic floor muscles may be especially tight, and often clenched.

Here is one suggestion to relax your pelvic floor:

Send a feeling of gratitude to your muscles for the work they do to protect you.

Take a deep breath. Imagine the air going right down into the pelvic floor and massaging it from the inside.



For information about the pelvic floor, including what it is, how to locate it, and other ways to relax it, see the Trans Care BC webpage [Understanding the pelvic floor](#).



O is for Opening and closing the eyes

We blink our eyes more rapidly in response to stress. Slowly opening and closing your eyes can help counter this response.

Cats blink slowly to indicate trust and affection. If you've ever sent "love blinks" to a cat, you might have found it soothing too!

Here is one suggestion to calm your nervous system by opening and closing your eyes:

Slowly and intentionally, open and close your eyes for ten seconds.

Reflect on how this feels in your body. If it feels good, try it for another ten seconds.

R is for Regulating breath

Shallow, rapid breathing is a life-saving nervous system response to danger. If we must run away from a threat, we need all the oxygen we can get!

However, many of the stressors we experience are not things we can physically run away from, and anxious rapid breathing can add to the stress we are experiencing, rather than decrease it.



When we breathe too quickly (called hyperventilation), we might notice tingling around the mouth, in our fingers, or in other parts of our body. We might feel dizzy or lightheaded.

We can intervene and create positive change in this cycle by consciously slowing down our breath.

Here are two suggestions to slow your breath:

Breathing through your skin

Breathe out. Pause.

Then, breathe in as slowly as you can. Imagine you are breathing in through your skin.

Take a few regular breaths, then breathe in. Pause.

Then, breathe out as slowly as you can. Imagine you are breathing out through your skin.

Holding and waiting

Breathe out, and hold your breath.

Wait until you feel your body's need for breath. Then, breathe in.

Take a few regular breaths.

Breathe in, and hold your breath.

Wait until you feel your body's need to let it go. Then, breathe out.



T is for Toes and fingers, hands and feet

When we experience stressors, our bodies often get extra energy from stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. This can make us feel restless, which might show up as fidgeting in our hands or feet. Or, sometimes, our bodies feel frozen or numb in response to stressors.

Intentionally moving your fingers, toes, hands or feet can remind your nervous system that you are still present and able to make choices, even while experiencing stress.

Here is one suggestion to intentionally move your toes, fingers, hands or feet:

Intentionally clench, shake, or wiggle a single digit or limb—a finger, a toe, a hand, a foot. Move between different digits or limbs at a pace that feels right.

While you move, you might think a message directly to your body affirming that movement, such as:

- “It’s okay. You can get out of here if you need to.”
- “See, we’re still alive and responsive.”

A is for Aaaahhh

Stress can affect our vocalization greatly, as our stressed bodies can struggle to regulate the breathing and small body movements in our throats and mouths required to speak.

Intentionally using our vocal cords can help tell our bodies that we are safe, and we can relax. Many cultural and spiritual practices include regular singing and humming, which have both been proven to reduce stress.

Here’s one suggestion for a way to use your vocal cords and combine it with a playful approach, which can also help reduce stress.

Open your mouth and say, “Aaahhh.”
You can do this quietly or loudly.

Experiment with different intonations.
How many emotions can you express with this one syllable?

Scrunch up your face and play with facial expressions.
If you have a mirror, play with your own face as you might play with a baby’s.

L is for Look and listen

When we are stressed, it can be hard to pay full attention to our surroundings, since we are distracted by a stressor, or our own anxious, angry, or difficult thoughts.

When stressed, we might feel especially sensitive to sounds, and be especially irritated, startled, or panicked when we hear unpleasant or loud noises. Or, if we feel stressed often, we might learn to shut down sensation, and listen less to the noises in our environment, and take less time to really look at the environment around us.

By taking intentional time to look and listen to the immediate world around us, we can get oriented and come home to the present moment. By taking the time to do this, we are telling our nervous systems that we are safe.

Here's one suggestion for how to look and listen intentionally:

Find five things you can hear.

- Rather than rushing through the list, take time to listen to each sound.
- Notice how they come and go, or how they vary over time.

Find five things you can see.

- Take the time to really look at each item.
- How does light hit the surface of the object? What patterns, colours and shapes do they have?

S is for Saliva

Sometimes, our mouths become dry as a response to stress.

However, even while stressed, we can usually make saliva flow consciously if we choose to. This is a way of saying to the nervous system, "You can relax now."

Here are two suggestions to encourage your saliva to flow:

Pay attention to the inside of your mouth. Use a sucking action to bring saliva into it.

Drink some water. This helps stimulate saliva production.

This also helps you stay hydrated, which helps your body manage stress!