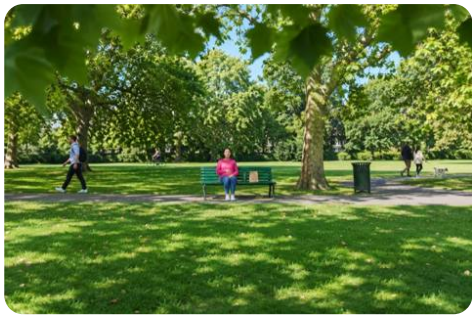
NEWS LESSON

There Is No Reset Button: What the Evidence Says About Calming the Nervous System



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What makes a health claim sound convincing even when it is not well supported?
2. In your experience, is feeling calm something you can control, or does it depend on circumstances?
3. Is a certain amount of stress necessary for a good life, in your view?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**dysregulated**	☐	A	worried or badly affected by a problem
2	**autonomic**	☐	B	working automatically, without you thinking about it
3	**immersion**	☐	C	not the same in every part or case
4	**overtraining**	☐	D	the facts and conditions around a situation
5	**unglamorous**	☐	E	the act of putting the whole body into water
6	**uneven**	☐	F	doing too much exercise without enough rest
7	**troubled**	☐	G	not working in a steady, balanced way
8	**circumstances**	☐	H	ordinary and not exciting

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A Guardian feature finds that the viral idea of a nervous system reset has no physiological basis, though slow breathing and ordinary habits have some support. Most of that support concerns short-term measurements, not proven health outcomes.

1 Social media has found a new villain in the "dysregulated" nervous system and a matching range of remedies: tapping, humming, gargling, cold plunges, vibrating plates and acupressure mats, all promoted as ways to reset the body to calm. In a feature published on 2 October 2026, The Guardian put the premise to doctors and other specialists, and none of them took it at face value.

2 Their objection was twofold. There is no such thing as resetting the nervous system, and nobody should want to, because the system's value lies in responding to circumstances. Its autonomic branch regulates heart rate, blood pressure and digestion through two main parts: the sympathetic system, which mobilises the body for a challenge, and the parasympathetic system, which conserves energy and supports recovery. Sympathetic activity rises under any stress, from an urgent email to a bereavement, and we depend on it to exercise, concentrate and meet deadlines.

3 The real difficulty arises when recovery lags behind demand. Failing to wind down can leave people feeling "wired and tired" and may, the specialists say, contribute to inflammation and cardiovascular and metabolic problems. The goal is therefore not permanent calm but flexibility: the ability to rise to a challenge and then return to baseline.

4 Slow breathing has the clearest support. A 2022 systematic review and meta-analysis of 223 studies, published in Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews, found that voluntary slow breathing was associated with higher vagally mediated heart rate variability during a session, immediately afterwards and after multi-session programmes. Dr Serena Lai, a London psychiatrist, cites research suggesting that about six diaphragmatic breaths a minute is among the most effective ways of producing a short-term change, and she suggests inhaling for about five seconds and exhaling for five, for five to ten minutes. One month-long trial found that five minutes a day of "cyclic sighing" improved mood. The measure involved, however, is a proxy for autonomic activity, and a better reading on it is not the same as a proven health benefit.

5 The remaining evidence is uneven. Regular aerobic exercise improves autonomic regulation over time, but overtraining is associated with reduced variability, so rest should not take a back seat. Cold immersion triggers a sympathetic response first, with a parasympathetic rebound afterwards, and neurosurgeon Dr Kevin Tracey says the credible evidence is not yet strong enough to show meaningful benefits for regulation, so the jury is still out, though he sees no reason to stop if you enjoy it and feel calmer. Implanted vagus nerve stimulation is an established treatment for epilepsy and treatment-resistant depression, yet independent clinical evidence for consumer devices is limited, which is not the same as proof that they fail. Evidence for acupressure mats is thinner still.

6 The honest answer to the headline, then, is that five minutes cannot reset anything, and that slow breathing may change some short-term measurements. The advice that survives scrutiny is unglamorous: regular sleep, movement, time outdoors, rest and a plan for stress. Anyone troubled by persistent anxiety or exhaustion should seek medical advice, because a breathing exercise is no substitute for it.

Sources: The Guardian, Feeling wired? The truth about 'nervous system resets'; Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews, Effects of voluntary slow breathing on heart rate and heart rate variability: A systematic review and a meta-analysis. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The review found that slow breathing raised heart rate variability only during a session, not afterwards. (T) (F) (NG)
2. The evidence for acupressure mats is weaker than the evidence for slow breathing. (T) (F) (NG)
3. The text says consumer vagus nerve devices have been proven not to work. (T) (F) (NG)
4. The review found that slow breathing worked better in younger people than in older people. (T) (F) (NG)
5. The text suggests that a better heart rate variability reading does not by itself prove a health benefit. (T) (F) (NG)

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

baseline	conserves	established	lags	negligible	rebound	slump	twofold

1. Where the supply of skilled staff _____ behind demand, wages tend to rise.
2. A hibernating animal _____ energy by slowing almost everything its body does.
3. Researchers recorded each volunteer's resting pulse as a _____ before the programme began.
4. The company's shares dipped on Monday, but a strong _____ on Tuesday wiped out the loss.
5. The appeal of the scheme is _____ : it saves money and it saves time.
6. She is an _____ authority on sleep research, quoted in many journals.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The review reported a _____ increase in heart rate variability, but not that it lasted. (MEASURE)
2. Specialists remained _____ of any claim that promised an instant fix. (SCEPTIC)
3. The _____ of the trial was limited because only a short period was studied. (RELIABLE)
4. Overtraining without enough rest can lead to a _____ in performance. (DETERIORATE)
5. It would be _____ to conclude that a better reading means a better health outcome. (JUSTIFY)

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. At this level the preposition often belongs to a fixed phrase, so learn each one as a whole chunk with an example.

at for in of on to with

1. Promising an instant cure is tantamount _____ misleading the public.
2. The success of the programme is contingent _____ people sticking to it.
3. Early attempts to measure calm were fraught _____ difficulty.
4. The claim is _____ odds with all the available evidence.
5. The programme succeeded by virtue _____ its simplicity.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. How should journalists and influencers talk about health ideas that are only partly supported?
2. Does it matter if a habit helps partly because you believe in it, as long as you feel better?
3. What do you think is lost when complex biology is summarised in a slogan like "reset your nervous system"?

9 Role-play: is the mat worth it?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the flatmate who wants to buy

You saw a video about a spiky mat that promises to calm you down. It costs a lot. Explain why you want it and try to persuade your flatmate to share the cost.

Student B · the flatmate who is unsure

You are not sure the mat is worth the money. Ask about the evidence, suggest a cheaper idea and try to agree on a plan you are both happy with.

Useful phrases

I saw a video that says it works in five minutes.
That's a lot of money for a mat.
What's the evidence?
I'd rather try something free first.
Let's wait a week and then decide.
I'm not convinced, but I'm happy to try.

Afterwards, tell the class: did you buy the mat, and why?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 G · 2 B · 3 E · 4 F · 5 H · 6 C · 7 A · 8 D

4 True, false or not given

1 F · 2 T · 3 F · 4 NG · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 lags · 2 conserves · 3 baseline · 4 rebound · 5 twofold · 6 established

6 Word forms

1 measurable · 2 sceptical · 3 reliability · 4 deterioration · 5 unjustified

7 Language focus

1 to · 2 on · 3 with · 4 at · 5 of

This lesson is free. If it saved you time, you can support johnplusnews at **ko-fi.com/johnplusenglish**