

From Plate to Peace: A Science-Based Guide to How Food, Breath, and the Vagus Nerve Shape Mental Health



*A Wild Moon Healing Perspective on the Gut-Brain
Connection*

By

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From Plate to Peace: A Science-Based Guide to How Food, Breath, and the Vagus Nerve Shape Mental Health

Food and breath do more than sustain life — they heal it. They are medicine, shaping the chemistry of our minds and the rhythm of our lives.

This white paper examines how proteins, enzymes, hormones, neurotransmitters, and the vagus nerve form a living network that connects diet, breathing, and mental health. We explore the intersection of diet and breath in shaping mental health, framed through the Wild Moon Healing lens, which encompasses three centers of intelligence (head, heart/lungs, gut), two brains (cranial and enteric), and the vagus nerve as the living bridge that connects it all. We demonstrate how science and spirit converge in practical pathways to resilience.

Key Findings:

- **Proteins are foundational.** Proteins form the foundation of mental health by providing amino acids necessary for the production of neurotransmitters such as serotonin, dopamine, and GABA.¹ Insufficient protein intake can lead to diminished mental health, while excessive amounts may contribute to inflammation and increased sympathetic stress. This highlights the necessity of a balanced diet for promoting mental well-being.
- **Enzymes, hormones, and neurotransmitters are messengers.** They regulate mood, stress, and resilience. Key players include cortisol, oxytocin, acetylcholine, and insulin, all of which are vital for maintaining balance in the nervous system.
- **The vagus nerve acts as a conductor.** It links the gut to the brain and carries 80% of signals from the gut to the brain. A strong vagal tone enhances resilience, while a weak tone can make the system more vulnerable to trauma and anxiety.
- **The gut is the second brain.** It produces the majority of serotonin and many other neurotransmitters, significantly influencing mood through diet and the health of the microbiome.
- **Breath is the conscious key to mental health.** Slow, intentional breathing strengthens vagal tone, reduces cortisol levels, balances neurotransmitters, and integrates the three centers of intelligence: the brain, the heart, and the gut. When done mindfully, this conscious act empowers individuals to take control of their mental well-being.

Conclusion:

Mental health is not shaped by thoughts or therapy alone — it is rooted in the body's chemistry, influenced by diet and breath. Proteins build the foundation, the vagus nerve carries the signals, and breath gives us conscious access to calmness. By aligning food with mindful breathing, we can move beyond survival mode and reclaim what is ours by nature: clarity, calm, and connection. From plate to peace, the path is already within us.

¹ Marx, W., Lane, M., Hockey, M., & Jacka, F. (2022). *Nutritional psychiatry: The present state of the evidence*. *Nutrients*, 14(10), 2061. MDPI. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu14102061>

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SECTION 1. Introduction - The Moonlit Invitation

Healing is not only physical but also energetic, emotional, and spiritual — and food, proteins, and breath form the foundation of this rhythm. What you eat is more than fuel; it is energy that communicates with your cells, your nervous system, and your spirit. Food, we often forget, is not just a source of physical sustenance, but a powerful tool that can transform our mental and spiritual well-being.² With each bite, you hold the potential to nourish mind, body, and soul — fostering clarity, calm, and connection. In this way, we truly do become what we eat, in every sense of the phrase.

This white paper explores food, breath, and the vagus nerve as part of what I call the healing bridge—the physical and energetic connection between head and body that shapes our mental health. Along the way, we’ll also look at the three centers of intelligence—head, heart, and gut—that make this bridge a living system.



I am still on a healing journey, having already released over 100 pounds, and I continue to walk my path forward. My journey began as a physical one: changing how I ate, moving my body, addressing undiagnosed Lyme disease, and recovering from physical trauma that required multiple surgeries and hardware. But along the way, I discovered something deeper — healing is never just physical. It is energetic, emotional, and spiritual.

Everything is energy, and energy connects everything. When I began to view health through this lens, I stopped seeing food as “calories” or “carbs vs. protein” and began to see it as energy that communicates with my cells, my nervous system, and even my sense of spirit. The choices we make at the table ripple into our mental health, the rhythm of our breath, and how we show up in the world.

To understand this, we need to explore three centers of intelligence (the head, the heart/lungs, and the gut), two brains (the cranial brain and the “second brain” in the gut), and the living bridge between them: the vagus nerve. And at the root of it all? Proteins, enzymes, hormones, and neurotransmitters — each weaving back into the simplest, most sacred act we have: the breath.

² Merino del Portillo, M., Clemente-Suárez, V. J., Ruisoto, P., Jiménez, M., Ramos-Campo, D. J., Beltrán-Velasco, A. I., Martínez-Guardado, I., Rubio-Zarapuz, A., Navarro-Jiménez, E., & Tornero-Aguilera, J. F. (2024). *Nutritional Modulation of the Gut–Brain Axis: A Comprehensive Review of Dietary Interventions in Depression and Anxiety Management*. *Metabolites*, 14(10), 549. MDPI. <https://doi.org/10.3390/metabo14100549>

In this paper, I use the term healing bridge for the entry point of nourishment and breath through the nose and mouth — the connection between head and body that makes healing possible — and living bridge for the vagus nerve, which carries those signals between gut and brain. I also refer to breath as part of our cycles, much like the moon and the seasons, reminding us that healing is both biological and rhythmic.

As a healer and guide, I have witnessed how science and spirit converge at the table and in the breath. This white paper will demonstrate how diet, breath, and the vagus nerve can be harnessed to restore mental health and balance.

SECTION 2. The Three Centers of Intelligence

True intelligence does not live in the head alone — it flows through three centers: the head, the heart, and the gut that work together to shape mental health. Each carries its own wisdom, each speaks its own language, and together they determine whether we live in clarity or confusion, resilience or overwhelm.



For centuries, we were taught to believe that intelligence lives only in the head — that the brain is the master and the body merely followed orders. But healing reveals the deeper truth: the head, heart/lungs, and gut form an integrated system of intelligence. Each one influences mental health, and the harmony — or dissonance — between them shapes how we think, feel, and experience life.

The Head: Cognitive Clarity

The head is where thought, perception, and logic reside. It processes facts, makes plans, and solves problems. However, the head cannot function on thought alone — it relies on proteins and neurotransmitters to send signals, form memory, and maintain focus. For instance, serotonin helps maintain a steady mood, dopamine fuels motivation, and enzymes like COMT remove stress messengers, allowing the mind to reset.

When the head is supported by proper nourishment, it achieves clarity. Conversely, when it is deprived — due to lack of proteins, sluggish enzymes, or excess cortisol — the head spins, clouded by worry, anxiety, or fog.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

The head also corresponds with the Third Eye and Crown Chakras. Here, clarity is not only cognitive but intuitive. You see with your eyes, but you perceive with your inner vision. Nourishing this center fosters not just focus, but wisdom and spiritual connection.

The Heart + Lungs: Emotional Intelligence

The heart and lungs hold the wisdom of connection and compassion. Every breath sends a message through the vagus nerve signaling either “You are safe” or “You are in danger.” This is

where we experience love, grief, and a sense of belonging. It is also where the parasympathetic nervous system is most deeply rooted.

When we feel safe and appreciated, hormones such as oxytocin increase, which helps calm the heart and strengthens our bonds with others. Conversely, when we are under stress, cortisol floods our bloodstream, causing our hearts to race, our chests to tighten, and our breath to shorten. The proteins in our bodies shape the receptors that respond to these signals, which means our ability to love and find calm is influenced by what we eat and how we breathe.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

The heart and lungs align with the Heart and Throat Chakras. The heart is an energetic healing bridge, while the nose and mouth act as a physical healing bridge. This is where love, compassion, and truth meet—both metaphorically in your heart center and physically in the body.

Deep, purposeful breaths open the throat to authentic expression, while expanding the heart into empathy and connection. Physically, it oxygenates the organs and gut, sending happier signals to the brain. This center is also part of a sacred triad: head, heart, and gut. When the heart is balanced, it restores trust between the three centers, allowing energy, breath, and communication to flow as one.

The Gut: Intuitive Wisdom

The gut is not just responsible for digestion — it also functions as a second brain, containing its own network of neurons, receptors, and messengers. Approximately 90% of our serotonin is produced here,³ along with dopamine and GABA. The gut's microbiome plays a crucial role in the production of these neurotransmitters, which significantly influence our moods and stress responses.

The gut communicates with the head through the vagus nerve,⁴ sending more signals upward than it receives in return. When the gut is inflamed, depleted, or poorly nourished, these signals can amplify stress. Conversely, when the gut is balanced, calm, and well-nourished, it transmits messages of peace, trust, and intuition.

³ Clapp, M., Aurora, N., Herrera, L., Bhatia, M., & Wilen, E. (2017). *Gut Microbiota's Effect on Mental Health: The Gut-Brain Axis*. Clinics and Practice, 7(4), 987. PMC. <https://doi.org/10.4081/cp.2017.987>

⁴ Gargus, M., et al. (2025). *Mechanisms of Vagus Nerve Stimulation for the Treatment of Diseases*. Frontiers in Neuroscience. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnins.2024.1527842>

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

The gut corresponds with the Solar Plexus, Sacral, and Root Chakras. This is the seat of trust, power, and grounded intuition. A nourished gut allows energy to flow from stability (Root) through creativity (Sacral) into confidence and willpower (Solar Plexus). Together, they create a foundation of safety and resilience that supports both body and spirit.

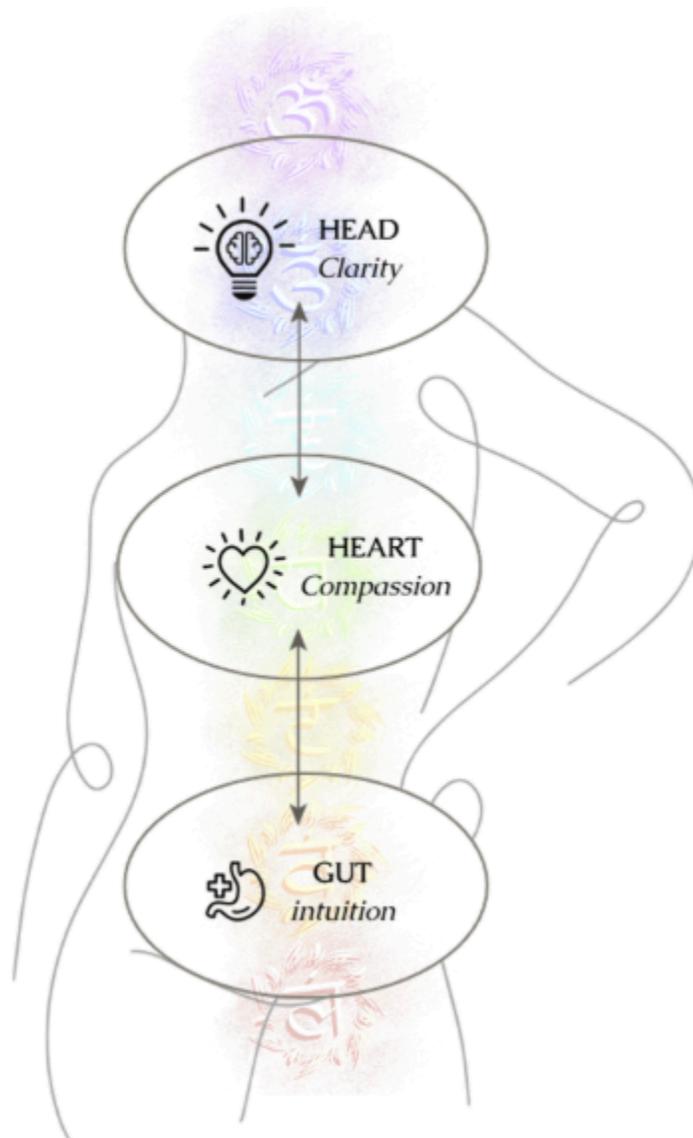


Figure 1 - The body holds three centers of intelligence: the Head (clarity), Heart (compassion), and Gut (intuition). Balance among them is key to mental health.

Integration: A Chorus of Intelligence

You can't heal through logic and knowledge alone; you can't heal in your head. You can only heal in your body.

True healing occurs when we align the head, heart/lungs, and gut, allowing us to live in a state of flow—clear-minded, emotionally balanced, and intuitively grounded. However, when one center becomes imbalanced, the others struggle to compensate, which can lead to anxiety, depression, or disconnection.

Just as the heart chakra bridges the lower and upper centers of our being, the physical nose and mouth act as a healing bridge—connecting what we breathe and eat to the state of our mental health. This bridge is the entry point to the vagus nerve and the dialogue between body and brain.

Proteins are essential building blocks for every cell in our body. They create neurotransmitters, receptors, and enzymes that facilitate communication throughout our systems. The vagus nerve acts as the conductor, harmonizing the interactions between all of our body's intelligence into a cohesive rhythm.

SECTION 3. The Two Brains

We don't just think with the brain in our head — we also think and feel with the “second brain” in our gut. And in truth, this second brain speaks louder: nearly 80% of vagus nerve signals travel upward from gut to head, shaping mood, clarity, and resilience.



Science now confirms what ancient wisdom long taught: intelligence is not confined to the skull. The cranial brain holds thought, memory, and meaning. But the enteric brain — a vast network of neurons, receptors, enzymes, and messengers in the digestive system — is equally vital. Together, these two brains form a dialogue that determines whether we live in balance or dissonance.

The Cranial Brain: Master Conductor

The brain processes thoughts, stores memories, and generates meaning in the cranial region. It encompasses the limbic system, where emotions and deep neural pathways develop, and the prefrontal cortex, which helps us plan, regulate, and make decisions. It is here that trauma grooves are carved,⁵ keeping us in autopilot, stuck in sympathetic overdrive.

Many people think the answer lies in willpower—trying harder to form new neural pathways in the head. But habits rarely hold when we rely on the thinking brain alone. Real change happens when we engage the body through breath and nourishment—crossing the healing bridge where the vagus nerve begins.

The cranial brain does not act alone. It constantly listens to signals coming from the gut. In fact, what you experience as “intuition” or a sudden wave of anxiety is often the cranial brain interpreting messages from the gut.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

Stories that keep you stuck are born from looping in the head. Healing begins when you drop into the body — where breath, digestion, and movement break the cycle. Flow from within rewrites the story, freeing you from survival mode and opening the path to rhythm and renewal.

⁵ Zheng, P., et al. (2023). *Gut microbiota changes require vagus nerve integrity to mediate behavioral effects*. *Molecular Psychiatry*, 28, 237–248. Nature Publishing Group. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-023-02071-6>

The Enteric Brain: Wisdom of the Gut

Your gut is lined with over 100 million neurons, earning its title as the “second brain.” It not only manages digestion but also produces key neurotransmitters:

- **Serotonin:** About 90% originates here, regulating mood and sleep.
- **Dopamine:** Influences motivation and reward.
- **GABA:** Calms the nervous system and supports rest.

The gut doesn’t whisper — it shouts. Its influence on the cranial brain outweighs the messages it receives, meaning your mental state is often a reflection of your gut’s condition. When the gut is inflamed, those messages may manifest anxiety, depression, or brain fog. When the gut is nourished and balanced, it sends signals of calm, trust, and intuitive clarity.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

The gut is more than digestion — it is your center of trust, safety, and intuition. When inflamed, this “second brain” overwhelms the mind with fear, doubt, and confusion. When nourished, it becomes a steady compass, sending signals of calm, clarity, and inner knowing. Listening to your gut is not just a metaphor — it’s biology and intuition working in harmony.

The Vagus Nerve: The Messenger Between

Connecting these two brains is the vagus nerve, the great wandering bridge. Signals travel along its fibers in both directions, but the flow is not equal: about 80% of vagus activity carries information *from the gut to the brain*, not the other way around.⁶

Your mental health isn’t just ‘in your head’ — it’s heavily influenced by your gut. The food you eat sets the chemistry of those signals, and your breath shapes the rhythm they travel on, together creating the dialogue between your two brains.

While the vagus nerve is the living bridge that carries those signals, the true healing bridge lies just above it — the nose and mouth. This is where food and breath first enter the body, connecting the head to the body and initiating the vagus nerve’s pathway into the digestive tract, the second brain. In this way, every conscious breath and every nourishing bite is an act of healing that shapes the conversation between body and mind.

⁶ Margolis, K. G., Cryan, J. F., & Mayer, E. A. (2021). *The Microbiota–Gut–Brain Axis: From Motility to Mood*. *Gastroenterology*, 160(6), 1486–1499. Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1053/j.gastro.2020.10.066>

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

The vagus nerve is the river between your two brains, carrying the language of the body to the mind. Food writes the message, and breath delivers it. With mindful nourishment and steady breathing, the current flows clear, carrying calm and clarity. But when stress or inflammation clouds the waters, the message distorts. Clearing this channel restores harmony between body, mind, and spirit.

Evolutionary Purpose

Our ancestors were wired for survival. When facing danger — whether a predator or environmental threat — the sympathetic nervous system prepared the body by sending oxygen to the limbs for fight or flight. Over time, the gut–brain axis evolved as an integrated communication network linking digestion, immunity, and mood.

This design had a clear advantage: our emotional and physiological states aligned with digestive needs. If a food was toxic, or even if certain foods were consumed in excess, the gut could quickly signal distress to the brain, prompting avoidance and survival-based decisions. Today, those same pathways still operate — but instead of predators, it may be processed foods, stress, or inflammation sending alarms through the system.

What once helped us survive has, in truth, always shaped our mental health.

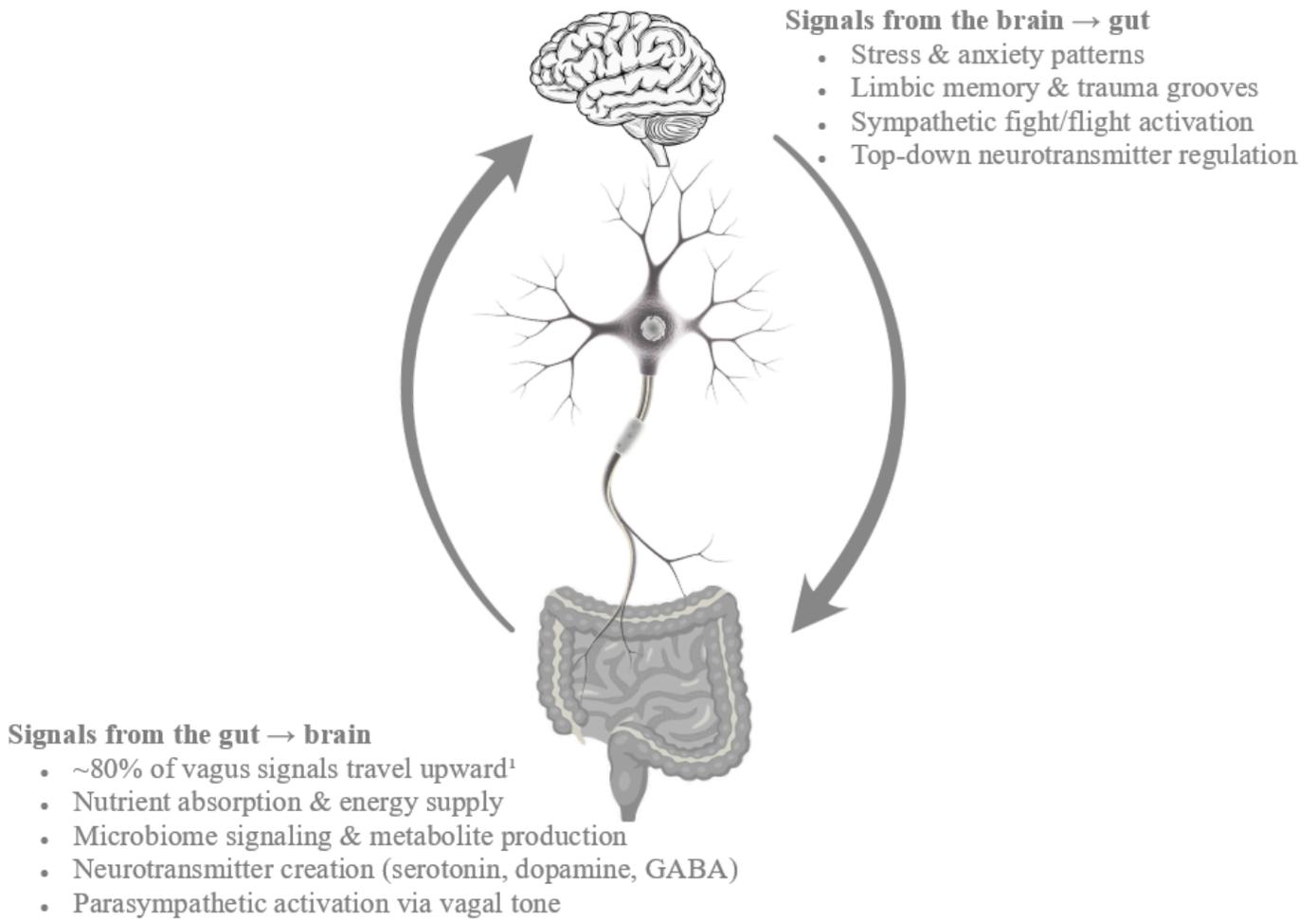


Figure 2 --80% of vagus nerve signals flow upward from gut to brain, strengthening parasympathetic calm and shaping resilience.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

The gut remembers survival. For our ancestors, it was the difference between life and death.

But survival is not the only story written in our bodies. These same pathways that once signaled danger can also signal peace. When nourished and balanced, the gut becomes more than a survival alarm — it becomes an anchor of trust, resilience, and intuitive wisdom. By choosing foods and practices that calm inflammation and strengthen vagal tone, we transform survival pathways into pathways of peace.

SECTION 4. Proteins: The Building Blocks of Mental Health

Proteins are more than nutrition — they are the architects of your body and the builders of your mood. Broken down into amino acids, they become neurotransmitters, directly linking what you eat to how you think and feel.



When most people hear the word “protein,” they picture meat, beans, tofu, eggs, or shakes at the gym. But proteins are far more than what sits on your plate. They are the workers of life itself — folding into shapes that become enzymes, hormones, receptors, and structures. Without them, neither the body nor the mind could function.

What Proteins Are

Proteins are constantly broken down and rebuilt, making dietary intake a critical factor for mental health. Proteins are long chains of amino acids that fold into intricate shapes. Amino acids not only become neurotransmitters, but also fuel vagal signaling — proteins literally strengthen the body’s ability to shift into calm. Think of them as origami — the way they fold determines their function. Some proteins act as enzymes, speeding up vital reactions. Others serve as receptors, listening for signals like serotonin or oxytocin. Still others provide structure, building everything from muscle to myelin (the sheath that protects nerves).

But proteins are more than scaffolding and switches. They are like instruments in an orchestra. Each has a unique shape, a unique “tone,” and when activated, they vibrate in specific ways to carry out their tasks. Some act as builders, giving structure to muscles, skin, and organs. Others act as messengers, folding into precise shapes to become enzymes or hormones that trigger cascades of change.

In sound healing, we understand that vibration is communication — a singing bowl resonates, a gong ripples through the body, and every cell responds. Proteins work in the same way. Their shape is their song. A properly folded protein “rings true,” sending clear messages to cells and systems. A misfolded protein, by contrast, is like a disharmonious note, disrupting the symphony of the body.

Seen this way, proteins are not just physical matter. They are vibrational beings — the music of life made tangible. They are the resonance that allows your cells, your nervous system, and your mind to stay in tune.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

Proteins are not just nutrition — they are vibration embodied. Just as sound healing restores harmony through resonance, proteins restore balance through their shape and song. Nourishing your body with the right proteins is like giving your cells the instruments they need to play the music of health.

The Role of Dietary Protein

When you eat protein-rich foods, your body breaks them down into amino acids. These amino acids serve as raw materials for the production of neurotransmitters and hormones that regulate mood, focus, and resilience.⁷

- **Tryptophan** → Serotonin (calm, sleep, mood regulation).
- **Tyrosine** → Dopamine (motivation, reward).
- **Glutamine** → GABA (relaxation, calm).
- **Choline (nutrient-like amino)** → Acetylcholine (rest, digest, focus).

Without sufficient dietary protein, your body cannot produce these messengers in adequate amounts. The result? Anxiety, depression, poor sleep, and a nervous system that struggles to regulate itself.

Mental Health Diets

Proteins act as the foundation for neurotransmitters, enzymes, and hormones — but where those proteins come from matters. High-protein diets dominated by red meat, processed meats, and bacon may contribute to inflammation and increase risks for both mental and physical health challenges.

In contrast, research suggests that a Mediterranean-style diet, rich in plant-based foods and moderate in protein, is associated with improved mental health.⁸

This nutritional model emphasizes a variety of protein sources, such as legumes, fish, nuts, seeds, poultry, eggs, and dairy, combined with fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. It is

⁷ Marx, W., Lane, M., Hockey, M., & Jacka, F. (2022). *Nutritional psychiatry: The present state of the evidence*. *Nutrients*, 14(10), 2061. MDPI. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu14102061>

⁸ Parletta, N., Zarnowiecki, D., Cho, J., et al. (2019). *A Mediterranean-style dietary intervention supplemented with fish oil improves diet quality and mental health in people with depression: A randomized controlled trial (HELFIMED)*. *Nutritional Neuroscience*, 22(7), 474-487

anti-inflammatory, improves neurotransmitter function, and supports brain health, reducing the risk of depression and supporting overall mental well-being.⁹

Key foods for mental health include:

- Fish and seafood are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which are building blocks for brain membranes.
- High-quality olive oil contains anti-inflammatory fats that help stabilize mood.
- Nuts and legumes are plant proteins that supply essential amino acids for neurotransmitter production.
- Organic, free-range poultry and eggs provide clean, high-quality protein to support neurotransmitter and hormone production.
- Fruits and vegetables provide antioxidants that protect the brain from stress.

Whenever possible, choose foods that are local, organic, and in season — aligning your body’s rhythm with nature’s rhythm.

Too Much, Too Little

Balance is key.

- **Insufficient protein intake** → weak vagal tone, fragile neurotransmitter production, and poor tissue repair. Mental health symptoms such as low mood, anxiety, brain fog, difficulty concentrating, poor stress resilience, disrupted sleep, and fatigue often follow.
- **Consuming too much protein** — especially certain types like highly processed, animal-based, without balance — can promote inflammation.¹⁰ Inflammation, in turn, stresses the nervous system and increases sympathetic activation causing irritability, heightened anxiety, restlessness, insomnia, racing thoughts, and feelings of being “on edge.”

The vagus nerve plays a central role in this process. When properly nourished, it uses amino acids to boost its signaling and stabilize mood. But when inflamed, vagal tone weakens, leaving the body more prone to anxiety, trauma patterns, and cycles of imbalance.

⁹ Marx, W., Lane, M., Hockey, M., & Jacka, F. (2022). *Nutritional psychiatry: The present state of the evidence*. *Nutrients*, 14(10), 2061. MDPI. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu14102061>

¹⁰ Pedersen, H. K., et al. (2020). *Protein intake and inflammation: metabolic and health effects*. *Nature Metabolism*, 2, 1105–1119. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s42255-020-00272-3>

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

Proteins and the Capacity Principle

Proteins are the quiet architects of potential. When they are scarce, the body hums at only a fraction of its song—like lungs taking in shallow breaths or a brain running on only part of its power. This is the essence of the Capacity Principle: most of our healing potential lies untapped until we nourish it. With enough protein, the body remembers its fullness. Pathways open, messages flow, and your inner symphony can rise to its true potential—restoring rhythm across body, mind, and spirit.

Wild Moon Healing Tips: Eating for Mental Health

- Choose Mediterranean-style proteins: fish, legumes, nuts, seeds, poultry, and eggs.
- Favor plants first — local, organic, and seasonal foods reduce inflammation and support neurotransmitter balance.
- Include omega-3-rich seafood twice weekly for mood stability.
- Remember: *Food is energy* — what you eat today becomes the serotonin, dopamine, and GABA your nervous system relies on tomorrow.

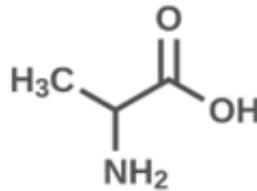
DIETARY PROTEIN (FOOD)

This is where it all begins



AMINO ACIDS (BUILDING BLOCKS)

Ex: Tryptophan — Serotonin | Tyrosine — Dopamine | Glutamine — GABA



NEUROTRANSMITTERS



- Serotonin = Calm
- Dopamine = Focus
- GABA = Relaxation
- Acetylcholine = Rest/Digest



MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

Balanced

Imbalance

Balance =
resilience,
clarity, peace



Imbalance =
anxiety,
depression,
stress reactivity

Figure 3- Proteins are broken down into amino acids, which build neurotransmitters that regulate mood and resilience. For a detailed breakdown of amino acid–neurotransmitter pathways, see Appendix A - Figure A1.

SECTION 5. The Body's Messengers

Enzymes, hormones, and neurotransmitters are the body's translators — turning protein into emotion, energy, and balance.



If proteins are the builders of the body, then enzymes, hormones, and neurotransmitters are the messengers. They are the language through which your cells, organs, and nervous system communicate. Each has a unique role, but all are woven from the same foundation: amino acids supplied by dietary protein.

For a detailed list of molecules, their relation to the nervous system, the gut–brain connection, and their functions, see Appendix A — Molecule Reference.

Enzymes: The Cleaners and Regulators

Enzymes are specialized proteins that accelerate chemical reactions. Without them, your body's processes would crawl at an unlivable pace. In mental health, enzymes often act as regulators:

- **COMT (Catechol-O-Methyltransferase):** Breaks down stress chemicals like dopamine and norepinephrine. If it's slow, stress tends to linger; if it's too active, you may feel exhausted.
- **MAO (Monoamine oxidase):** Breaks down serotonin and dopamine. Imbalances may cause depression or increased anxiety.
- **Acetylcholinesterase:** Eliminates acetylcholine after it signals “rest and digest.” Without this, messages accumulate, impairing memory and focus.

These enzymes don't just silently work in the background — they determine whether you recover smoothly from stress or get stuck in a cycle of overwhelm.¹¹ Enzymes are the regulators of recovery. They decide how quickly stress hormones and neurotransmitters are made, used, and cleared from the body.

When enzymes fall out of balance, stress lingers. Instead of completing the cycle, the body remains locked in survival mode — the experience we often describe as feeling stuck. Enzymes also depend on cofactors such as B-vitamins and magnesium — without them, even the best protein intake can't complete the stress cycle.

¹¹ Rosa, J. M., & Silva, T. (2019). *Monoamine oxidase inhibitors and psychiatric disorders*. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 10, 173. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00173>

Hormones: The Long-Distance Messengers

Hormones are chemical messengers that travel through your bloodstream to reach distant organs and tissues. They influence how you feel, how you metabolize energy, and how safe your body perceives it to be. Key hormones linked to mental health include:

- **Cortisol:** The stress hormone, essential in short bursts but harmful when elevated over the long term. Too much leads to anxiety, insomnia, and burnout.¹²
- **Insulin:** Controls blood sugar levels. Fluctuations in insulin can lead to mood swings, causing irritability or fatigue.
- **Oxytocin:** The bonding hormone influenced by vagus nerve activation.¹³ It increases with safe touch, connection, and slow breathing — Fostering feelings of trust and calm.

Each of these hormones relies on proteins: cortisol receptors are proteins, insulin is a protein hormone itself, and oxytocin is a small peptide similar to a protein.

Neurotransmitters: The Songs of the Nervous System

If enzymes regulate and hormones signal, neurotransmitters are the actual music your nervous system plays. They carry messages across nerve cells at lightning speed, shaping mood, thought, and resilience. Some of the most important include:

- **Serotonin:** Helps stabilize mood, supports sleep, and fosters a feeling of calmness. About 90% is produced in the gut.
- **Dopamine:** Fuels motivation and reward. Too little = apathy; too much = anxiety or mania.
- **GABA:** The body's natural tranquilizer. Low levels can cause racing thoughts and restless nights.
- **Acetylcholine:** The primary messenger of the vagus nerve, signaling rest, digestion, and learning.

Every one of these neurotransmitters relies on amino acids from protein. Without the raw materials, the songs cannot be played.

¹² Tracey, K. J. (2014). *The inflammatory reflex: Vagus nerve and the regulation of immunity*. Journal of Internal Medicine, 257(2), 145–153. PMC. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2796.2004.01321.x>

¹³ Tracey, K. J. (2014). *The inflammatory reflex: Vagus nerve and the regulation of immunity*. Journal of Internal Medicine, 257(2), 145–153. PMC. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2796.2004.01321.x>



Figure 4 - The Body's Messengers: When protein balance is off, the whole choir goes out of tune: neurotransmitters drop, inflammation rises, and the vagus nerve loses its steady rhythm. Balanced nourishment, rest, and conscious breath bring the system back into

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

When enzymes, hormones, and neurotransmitters work together, they create seasons within you. Enzymes are spring — sparking growth and new beginnings. Hormones are summer — full energy, vitality, and action. Neurotransmitters are autumn — release, harvest, and change.

And when imbalance comes, the body slips into winter — stillness that can feel like stagnation. Breath is the turning wheel that keeps these inner seasons flowing. Each conscious inhale and exhale tells your chemistry: the danger has passed, the cycle continues. In that moment, your body remembers its rhythm, and healing begins.

Hormonal/Circadian Rhythms

There is a strong association between enzymes, hormones, and neurotransmitters that is vital to our circadian rhythms, hormonal homeostasis, and energy metabolism.

All these factors determine the pace of processes that influence mood. Your body operates on a 24-hour clock, aligned with the sun and moon, which manifests daily patterns of mental health, bodily function, and behavior. The rhythm of this internal symphony synchronizes with the external environment, mainly the cycle of light and dark.¹⁴

Cortisol, for example, follows a circadian rhythm: it rises in the early morning to wake you up and gradually falls throughout the day. When this rhythm is disrupted—due to chronic stress, irregular sleep, or poor diet—mental health suffers, often manifesting as anxiety, burnout, or depression.

Melatonin works in counterbalance. As darkness falls, melatonin levels, signaling the onset of rest or sleep. Poor light exposure, excessive screen time, or disrupted sleep suppresses melatonin, weakening the parasympathetic system and leaving the body stuck in sympathetic overdrive.

Even proteins are part of this cycle. Feedback loops influence reproductive and thyroid hormones, while the availability of amino acids affects the rhythms of neurotransmitters. The result: your inner clocks and outer cycles — sun, moon, and seasons — move in harmony. When they are in sync, mental health stabilizes; when they drift apart, imbalance grows.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

Wild Moon Healing teaches that just as the sun and moon rise and fall, so too do our bodies move through cycles of energy, rest, and renewal. By aligning with these rhythms, we discover our natural pace and reclaim balance. This is part of what I call the *Capacity Principle* — most of us live using only a fraction of our potential until we honor the cycles that restore it. Honoring your truth means listening to the cycles within you — cycles that shift with your mental state, your environment, and the seasons. When inner and outer rhythms flow together, healing becomes harmony.

¹⁴ Walker WH 2nd, Walton JC, Nelson RJ. Disrupted circadian rhythms and mental health. *Handb Clin Neurol*. 2021;179:259-270. doi: 10.1016/B978-0-12-819975-6.00016-9. PMID: 34225967; PMCID: PMC11419288. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11419288/>

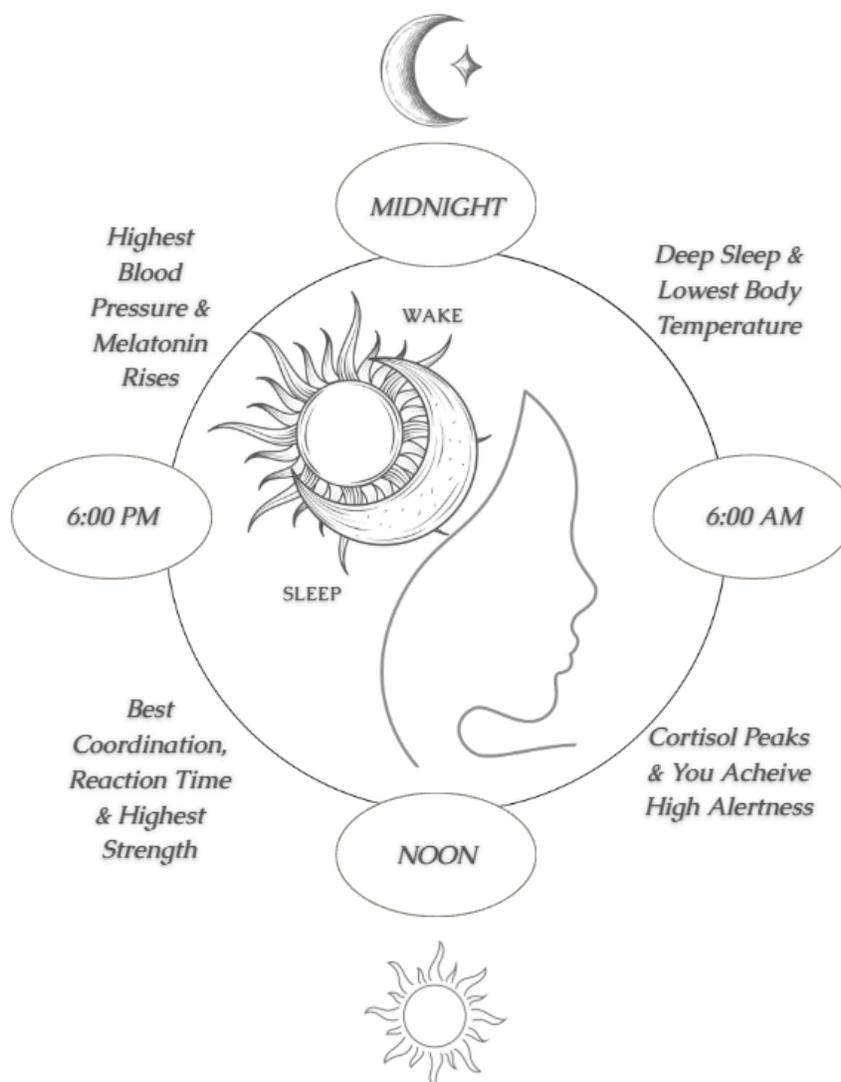


Figure 5 - Hormonal/Circadian Rhythms: Nature's Balance

Integration: Why This Matters for Mental Health

Together, enzymes, hormones, and neurotransmitters form a complex web of communication between the body and the mind. They determine whether you wake up refreshed with clarity or heavy with grogginess, whether you respond to stress with resilience or collapse, and whether you connect with others in safety or retreat into isolation.

Because proteins are their foundation, diet becomes a direct line to mental health. And weaving through it all are the vagus nerve and the breath — together acting as the conductor that translates chemistry into lived experience, survival into safety, and biology into peace.

SECTION 6. The Vagus Nerve — The Living Bridge

The vagus nerve is the body’s great bridge — the living pathway that decides whether you dwell in stress or return to calm.



Often called the “wandering nerve,” it begins in the brainstem and travels through the throat, heart, lungs, and gut, sending out branches like tributary rivers flowing from a great river throughout the body. It is the primary pathway of the parasympathetic nervous system — the part devoted to rest, digestion, repair, and peace.

Structure and Flow

- Originates in the medulla oblongata (lower brainstem).
- Travels down into the chest (heart and lungs), influencing heartbeat and breath rhythm.
- Extends deep into the gut, innervating the stomach, intestines, and digestive organs.
- Sends signals both ways — brain to body, and body to brain.

Yet here’s the surprising truth: the vagus nerve is not primarily a motor nerve telling the body what to do — it is mainly sensory. About 80% of its fibers carry information upward, from the body to the brain. These signals are not abstract; they are visceral messages about digestion, inflammation, safety, or threat. The brain then interprets them as mood, clarity, or distress.

This means your mental health is shaped less by conscious thought and more by the *felt sense* of your body. A calm gut sends the brain signals of ease and stability. An inflamed or imbalanced gut floods the brain with distress signals, which may show up as anxiety, depression, or brain fog.

The Role of Vagal Tone

The health of the vagus nerve is measured by its “tone,” much like the quality of a muscle.

- Strong vagal tone → steady heart rate variability, better stress recovery, emotional resilience¹⁵.

¹⁵ Gargus, M., et al. (2025). *Mechanisms of Vagus Nerve Stimulation for the Treatment of Diseases*. *Frontiers in Neuroscience*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnins.2024.1527842>

- Weak vagal tone → difficulty calming down, lingering anxiety, depression, trauma responses.

Vagal tone is strengthened not only through breath and movement but also through the body’s chemistry. Proteins provide raw materials for acetylcholine — the vagus nerve’s primary messenger. Enzymes regulate how long those signals last.

Hormones like oxytocin rise in response to vagal activation, reinforcing feelings of connection and safety. However, when you consume SAD (Standard American diet) foods, ingesting poor nutrition, hormones such as cortisol or epinephrine (adrenaline) can reinforce “stuckness” and anxiety. Over the long term, they can desensitize natural calming signals from the body.

The breath is the quickest way to improve vagal tone by deactivating the trauma response in the body. Trauma gets trapped when the stress cycle does not complete. The graph below shows how activation should rise and fall — and how regulation through breath brings you back to balance.

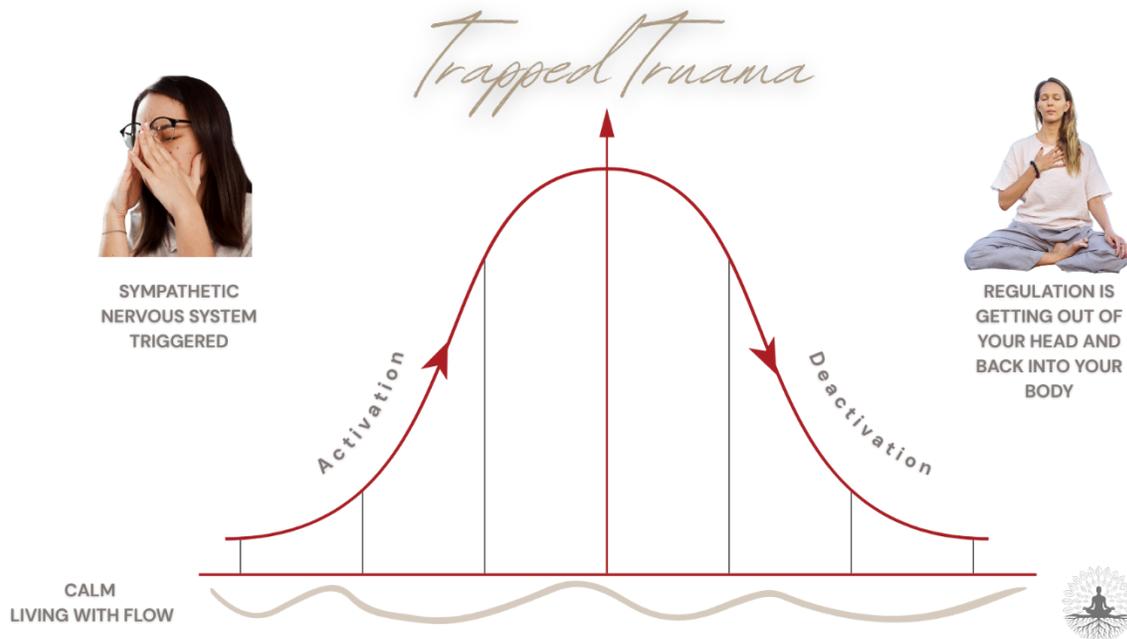


Figure 6- The trauma response can be quickly affected by purposeful breathing.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

Healing begins with awareness, but breath transforms awareness into embodiment. Mindful breathing strengthens vagal tone by restoring flow, shifting vibration, and bringing the body back to safety. Emotions are energy in motion — when vibration rises, flow opens and you feel lighter; when vibration falls, energy constricts, leaving you feeling stuck and unable to move forward.

Heart Rate Variability (HRV)

One way to measure how “in rhythm” you are is through Heart Rate Variability (HRV) — a key biomarker of nervous system balance. HRV is measured by tracking the tiny variations between heartbeats — often using a wearable device or EKG

- Low HRV often indicates a nervous system stuck in reactivity — quick to startle, slow to settle.
- High HRV indicates resilience¹⁶ — your mind and body working together, able to face a challenge and return to calm.

Think of HRV as your body’s thermostat. When it functions properly, it automatically adjusts to heat, cold, and comfort. When it’s stiff, you’re stuck on one reactive setting, no matter what life throws at you.

Symptoms of hypervigilance aren’t problems; they’re maps. Each one is an invitation to return to rhythm — showing exactly where healing is possible.

While science reveals the mechanics of our rhythm, our lived stories show us its impact.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

Your breath significantly affects HRV. When you inhale, your heart rate naturally increases as your lungs fill with air. As you release the breath, your heart rate naturally decreases. These beat-to-beat variations are primarily governed by the balance of your sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system. Controlled breathing directly influences this balance.

¹⁶ Russo, M. A., Santarelli, D. M., & O’Rourke, D. (2017). *The physiological effects of slow breathing in the healthy human*. *Breathe*, 13(4), 298–309. European Respiratory Society. <https://doi.org/10.1183/20734735.009817>

The Dance with the Sympathetic Nervous System

The vagus nerve doesn't work alone. It constantly balances against the sympathetic nervous system — the branch responsible for the fight-or-flight response.

- Sympathetic is the gas pedal, flooding the body with cortisol and norepinephrine.
- Parasympathetic (via the vagus nerve) is the brake, slowing the system back down, restoring digestion, and calming the heart.

When proteins, neurotransmitters, and enzymes are out of balance, the sympathetic system tends to dominate. As a result, the vagus nerve weakens, leaving you stuck in survival mode. But when balance is restored, the vagus regains strength, and the body can return to its natural healing rhythm.

Breath: Conscious Control of the Vagus Nerve

Breathing is one of the few functions that can be both automatic and voluntary. This is why breathwork is so powerful: it provides you with a direct way to influence the vagus nerve.

- Slow inhaleds, longer exhaleds → stimulate vagal tone, reduce cortisol, lower heart rate.
- Breath awareness practices → increase heart rate variability, building resilience.
- Somatic breathwork → helps release stored trauma, freeing the vagus from sympathetic loops.

Just as the moon's phases wax and wane, so too does vagal tone rise and fall — and breath is the tide that brings it back into balance. Through breath, you hold the ability to restore balance, strengthen the parasympathetic system, and calm the storm triggered by sympathetic overdrive. By consciously slowing and deepening your breathing, you can intentionally increase your HRV and shift your nervous system toward a more relaxed state.

Where Science and Spirituality Connect

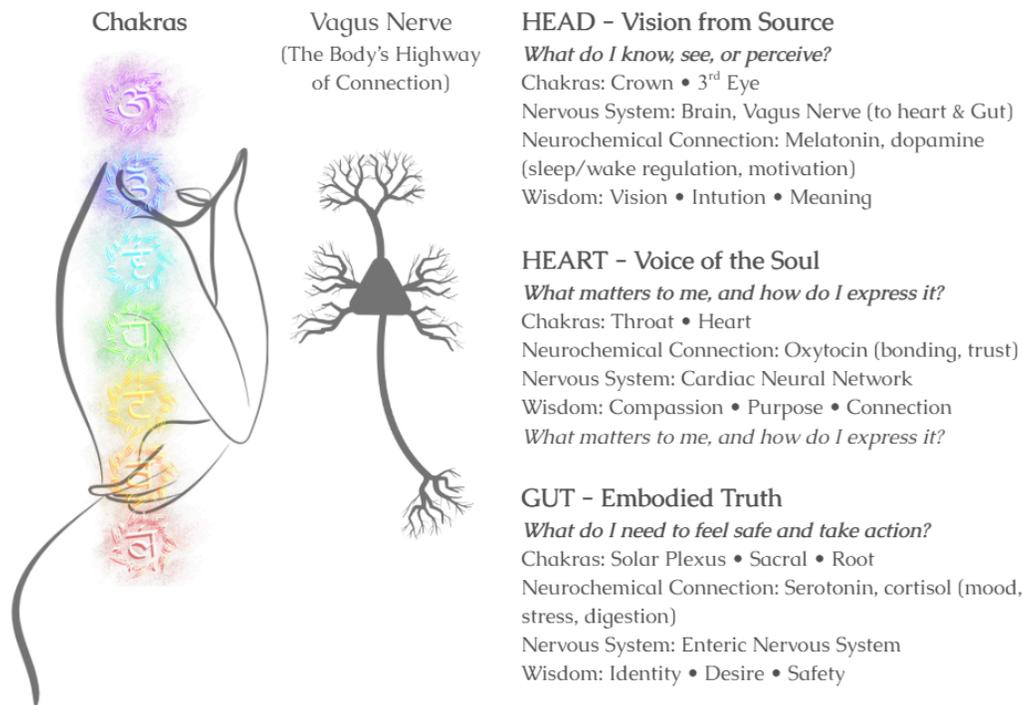


Figure 7 - The Vagus Nerve — The Living Bridge where 80% of signals flow upward.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

The vagus nerve is part of the bridges of healing: breath, heart, and trust. As the living bridge, it reminds us that healing is not linear but relational — it flows between systems. When nourished with food and breath, this bridge allows energy, emotion, and information to cross freely. We reclaim our rhythm and return to the state our bodies have always known — *peace*.

Wild Moon Healing Tips: Strengthening Vagal Tone

- Practice coherent (resonant) breathing: Inhale for 5 seconds and exhale for 5 seconds to achieve a pace of about 6 breaths per minute.
- Add gentle humming or chanting to stimulate vagal fibers in the throat.
- Use cold water splashes on your face to naturally trigger vagal activation.
- Build social safety: laughter, eye contact, and connection release oxytocin, reinforcing parasympathetic calm.

SECTION 7. Sympathetic vs. Parasympathetic Molecules

Mental health is the balance between two forces: sympathetic “gas pedal” molecules that drive stress, and parasympathetic “brake” molecules that restore peace.



The autonomic nervous system works like a teeter-totter. On one side is the sympathetic branch, pressing urgency into the body through fight-or-flight chemistry. On the other side is the parasympathetic branch, counterbalancing with signals of rest, digestion, and recovery. The molecules circulating in your body are the weights that tip this teeter-totter—deciding whether you live in reactivity or peace.¹⁷

Sympathetic Molecules — The Gas Pedal

These chemicals surge when the body prepares to survive. This includes waking in the morning and going about your daily routines.

- Cortisol (hormone): Mobilizes energy for action. In small bursts, it protects; in excess, it overwhelms, leading to anxiety, burnout, and insomnia.
- Dopamine (neurotransmitter): Fuels drive and focus, but in excess can heighten anxiety or push into manic states.
- Norepinephrine (stress neurotransmitter, related to dopamine): Increases heart rate, blood pressure, and alertness — preparing the body for danger.
- COMT (enzyme): Clears dopamine and norepinephrine. If sluggish, stress lingers; if overactive, motivation drains.

When sympathetic molecules predominate, the body remains in a state of survival mode. Thought loops, hypervigilance, shallow breathing, and disconnection become common. Sympathetic dominance may manifest as racing thoughts or panic.

¹⁷ Jänig, W. (2020). *Sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems — an overview*. Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 21, 540–555. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41583-020-0364-7>

Parasympathetic Molecules — The Brake

These messengers strengthen the vagus nerve and bring the body back into balance. This stability allows you to flow through your day with a state of composure that can't be ruffled by external events.

- Acetylcholine (neurotransmitter): The vagus nerve's leading voice, signaling rest, digest, and focus.
- GABA (neurotransmitter): The body's natural tranquilizer, calming neurons and soothing anxiety.
- Serotonin (neurotransmitter): Regulates mood, supports sleep, and enhances emotional stability — 90% made in the gut.
- Oxytocin (hormone): Rises with touch, safety, and connection, creating trust and reducing stress.
- MAO (enzyme): Clears serotonin and dopamine, helping reset the system.
- Acetylcholinesterase (enzyme): Fine-tunes parasympathetic signaling by clearing acetylcholine after it speaks.

When parasympathetic molecules are active, the body feels safe. Breathing deepens, digestion improves, heart rate slows, and calm awareness returns. Parasympathetic dominance may feel like deep calm after exhaling.

Ventral vs. Dorsal Vagal Pathways

Not all parasympathetic responses are the same. The vagus nerve has two branches:

- Ventral vagal (social connection + safety): This is the *healthy brake* — activated through breath, eye contact, safe relationships, and mindful presence. It supports calm regulation, connection, and resilience.
- Dorsal vagal (shutdown + freeze): This is the *emergency brake*. When stress overwhelms the system, the dorsal branch pulls the body into shutdown: numbness, dissociation, or collapse. While protective in trauma, experiencing it chronically can feel like depression, exhaustion, or “going offline.”

The key to healing is strengthening ventral vagal pathways through practices like slow breathing, sound, movement, and connection — so the parasympathetic system restores safety instead of pushing the body into shutdown.



<i>SYMPATHETIC</i>	<i>PARASYMPATHETIC VENTRAL VAGAL</i>	<i>PARASYMPATHETIC DORSAL VAGAL</i>
<p><i>Fight / Flight</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Fear</i> • <i>Panic</i> • <i>Anxiety</i> • <i>Frustration</i> • <i>Anger</i> • <i>Rage</i> <p>-----</p> <p>Increased heart rate, blood pressure, adrenaline, and pupil size.</p>	<p><i>Safe/Social/Calm</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Calm</i> • <i>Joy</i> • <i>Grounded</i> • <i>Trusting</i> • <i>Curious</i> • <i>Open</i> <p>-----</p> <p>Increased digestion, immunity, rest, and recuperation, oxytocin, and connected to others.</p>	<p><i>Freeze / Shutdown</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Numb</i> • <i>Trapped</i> • <i>Hopeless</i> • <i>Dissociated</i> • <i>Depressed</i> • <i>Lonely</i> <p>-----</p> <p>Decreased heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, muscle tone, eye contact, facial expressions, and awareness of human voices.</p>

Figure 8 - Nervous System Quick Reference Chart

Regulatory Molecules — The Balancers

Some messengers don't belong exclusively to one side; they influence both:

- **Insulin (hormone):** Regulates blood sugar. Balanced insulin stabilizes mood; erratic swings fuel both stress (sympathetic) and fatigue (parasympathetic crash).
- **Proteins (general):** Provide the amino acids to make every messenger in this system. Too little weakens vagal tone; too much can feed inflammation,¹⁸ tilting the balance toward stress.

These regulators determine whether your nervous system dances gracefully between stress and rest — or whether it stays stuck on one side. Proteins provide the raw material for the dance,

¹⁸ Tracey, K. J. (2007). *Physiology and immunology of the cholinergic antiinflammatory pathway*. *Journal of Clinical Investigation*, 117(2), 289–296. <https://doi.org/10.1172/JCI30555>

while breath acts as the rhythm that keeps it in balance. Together, they prevent the system from locking into survival mode and help restore harmony between body and mind.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

The molecules in your body are not random chemicals. They are the voices of your nervous system. Cortisol and norepinephrine sing the fiery song of survival; acetylcholine, GABA, and oxytocin hum the gentle melody of peace. Proteins provide the instruments, enzymes keep the rhythm, and the vagus nerve conducts the orchestra.

When the teeter-totter tips toward balance, you reclaim rhythm in your head, your heart, and your gut.

SYMPATHETIC MOLECULES

The "Gas Pedal": Fuels Activation and Alertness

These stress-related neurotransmitters and hormones activate the sympathetic nervous system, prompting the body to respond with action.



PARASYMPATHETIC MOLECULES

The "Brake": Regulation and Calm

These neurotransmitters and hormones help regulate and calm the nervous system, promoting a "rest and digest" state.

Figure 9 - *The Nervous System balances itself with a gas pedal (sympathetic response) and a brake (parasympathetic response).*

Wild Moon Healing Tips: Supporting Balance

Here are some ways to support your nervous system:

- Eat balanced proteins + fiber → stabilize blood sugar and insulin.
- Include healthy fats → nerve cell communication and reducing inflammation.
- Antioxidants & pre/probiotics → protects nerve damage caused by inflammation.
- Practice slow exhalations (1:2 breathing) → activates parasympathetic molecules.
- Reduce stimulants (caffeine, processed sugar) → lowers sympathetic spikes.
- Hydrate → dehydration taxes the nervous system.
- Supplementation → It's okay to address key nutrient deficiencies.
- Nature walk after meals → calm nervous system, reduce anxiety, assist digestion.
- Prioritize sleep → align nervous system function.
- Touch, connection, safe community → boosts oxytocin and vagal tone.

SECTION 8. The Gut as the Second Brain

Nearly 90% of serotonin and many other neurotransmitters originate in the gut, making digestion and microbiome health the foundation of emotional well-being.



The gut is more than a digestive tract — it is a vast neural network with over 100 million nerve cells, so intricately wired that scientists call it the enteric nervous system: our “second brain.” Unlike the cranial brain, it does not think in words or logic. Instead, it perceives through sensation, intuition, and chemistry — detecting fullness, nutrient flow, microbial balance, or inflammation — and then sending constant messages upward that shape mood, resilience, and clarity.

A Chemical Powerhouse

The gut produces many of the molecules that shape mental health:

- **Serotonin:** About 90% of the body’s serotonin originates in the gut lining¹⁹, influencing both digestion and mood.
- **Dopamine:** Produced in the gut and tied to motivation, movement, and reward.
- **GABA:** Created not only by gut neurons but also by gut bacteria, calming the nervous system.
- **Insulin:** Released by the pancreas (part of the digestive system), it regulates blood sugar and stabilizes energy and mood.
- **Proteins (dietary):** Broken down here into amino acids — the raw materials for all neurotransmitters and enzymes.

The gut is more than just a passive receiver of food, collecting and eliminating waste; it actively produces chemicals that influence mental health.

¹⁹ Clapp, M., Aurora, N., Herrera, L., Bhatia, M., & Wilen, E. (2017). *Gut Microbiota’s Effect on Mental Health: The Gut–Brain Axis*. *Clinics and Practice*, 7(4), 987. PMC. <https://doi.org/10.4081/cp.2017.987>

The Gut–Vagus–Brain Axis

The gut–vagus–brain axis is one of the body’s most important communication highways, linking digestion, mood, immunity, and cognitive function. Most of the signals don’t come from the brain down — they flow upward from the gut to the brain. What happens in your digestive system doesn’t just stay in your gut; it profoundly shapes your mental state, cognitive function, and immune/inflammatory response.²⁰

- A nourished, balanced gut → sends signals of safety and calm.
- An inflamed or imbalanced gut → sends distress signals that show up as anxiety, depression, or brain fog.

This explains why gastrointestinal issues so often mirror mental health struggles — and why addressing gut health can transform emotional wellbeing. Breath becomes the key here: because it directly influences vagal tone, mindful breathing not only calms the nervous system and supports mood, but also shows promise as a therapeutic tool for conditions like IBS, anxiety, and depression.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

Your gut is not only your second brain; it is your inner lunar compass. Like the moon, it reflects cycles — fullness when nourished with breath and proper nutrition, and emptiness when depleted, echoing as worry, fear, or fatigue throughout the body. Breath is the healing bridge — soothing the vagus nerve, calming the gut, and restoring harmony between body and mind. By honoring this cycle with breath and nutrition, you align inner tides with outer rhythm, transforming survival patterns into healing patterns.

The Role of the Microbiome

Your gut is home to trillions of bacteria — a living ecosystem called the microbiome that are meant to promote smooth daily operations in the human body. This ecosystem is a community of bacteria, fungi, and viruses in and on the body, playing crucial roles in digestion, immune system development and regulation, and protection against harmful pathogens.

By breaking down food into energy and nutrients, synthesizing essential vitamins, forming a protective barrier, and even manufacture neurotransmitters like serotonin and GABA,²¹ these microbes are vital for maintaining human health.

²⁰Zheng, P., et al. (2023). *Gut microbiota changes require vagus nerve integrity to mediate behavioral effects*. *Molecular Psychiatry*, 28, 237–248. Nature Publishing Group. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-023-02071-6>

²¹Loh, J. S., et al. (2024). *Microbiota–Gut–Brain Axis and Its Therapeutic Applications*. *Signal Transduction and Targeted Therapy*, 9, 68. Nature Publishing Group. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41392-024-01743-1>

Key roles of microbiome are:

- Digestion and metabolism.
- Immune system development
- Protection from pathogens
- Mental and overall health

A balanced and diverse microbiome is linked to improved physical and mental health, while imbalances are associated with various diseases. *(See Figure 7 to see how the gut can make or break your health.)*

- A diverse, balanced microbiome strengthens vagal tone, improves mood, and reduces inflammation.
- A depleted microbiome (from stress, poor diet, medications, and environment) weakens signaling, tilting the body toward sympathetic dominance, increasing inflammation and stress responses.
- Restoring a healthy microbiome through interventions like probiotics, prebiotics, and adopting a plant-rich, fiber-filled diet shows promise for improving mood and reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression by modulating neural signaling, inflammation, and the gut barrier.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

The gut is the lunar brain of the body: sensitive, cyclical, deeply attuned to rhythm. It translates what you eat, how you breathe, and how you live into the chemistry that guides your mental health. When you honor it with nourishing proteins, whole foods, and mindful breath, you align your second brain with your first. Together, they form a chorus of resilience, intuition, and calm.

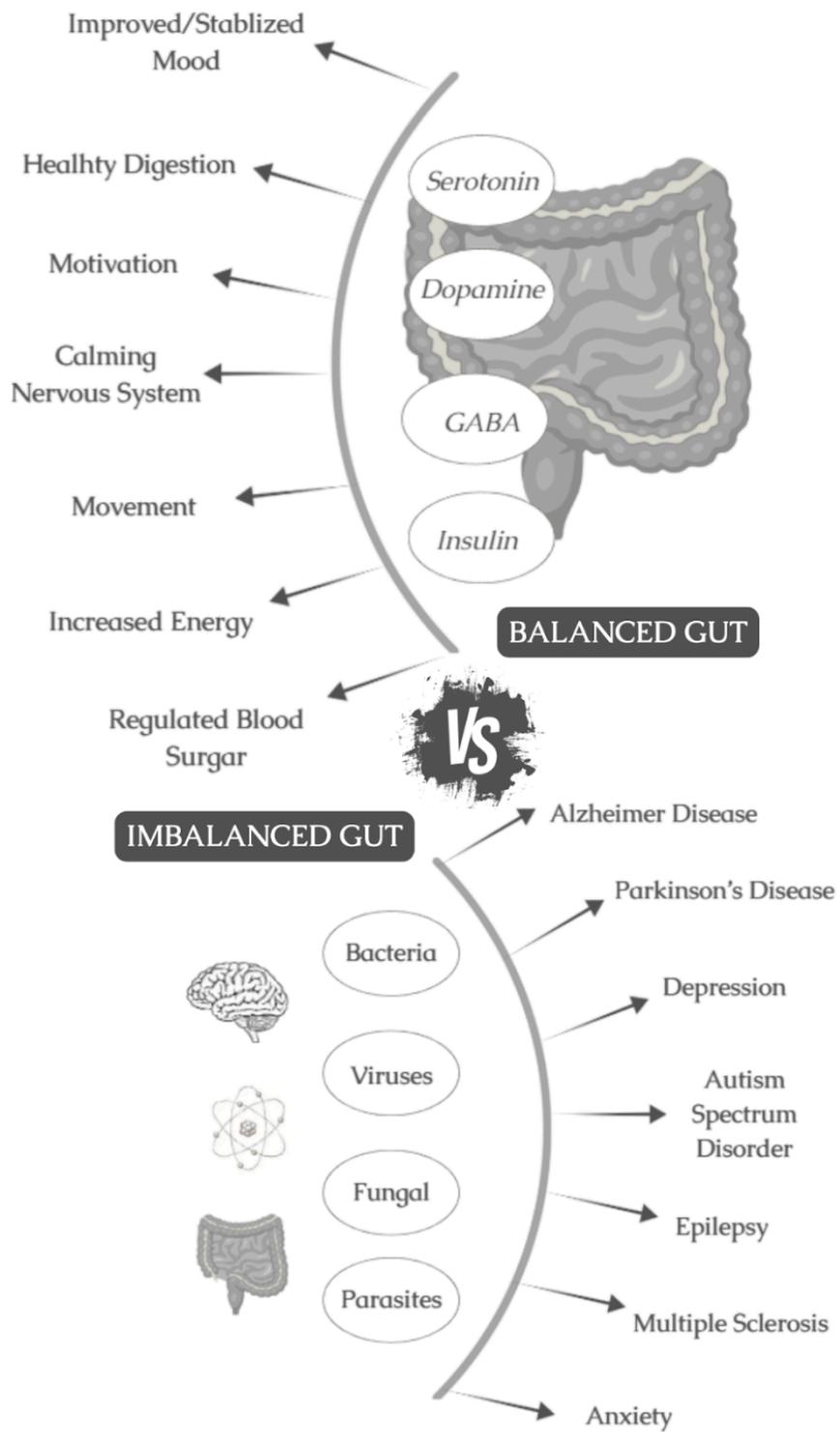


Figure 10 - The Gut is a chemical powerhouse that can make or break your health.

SECTION 9. The Breath as Medicine

Breath is the conscious key that regulates the vagus nerve, calms the limbic system, and restores balance across all three centers of intelligence.



If proteins are the raw material, enzymes the regulators, and the vagus nerve the bridge, then breath is the conscious key. Breath is unique because it is both an automatic and voluntary process — a doorway between body and mind. You breathe without thinking, but you can also choose to direct and shape it. With every purposeful inhale and exhale, you hold the power to shift from sympathetic overdrive into parasympathetic calm, restoring rhythm and resilience.

Physiological Medicine

The power of deep conscious breathing is that it releases toxins and tension, influencing your entire body and rewiring your brain in real time.

- Slow, deep breathing stimulates the vagus nerve, sending the message: *you are safe*.
- Extended exhalations lower heart rate and reduce cortisol,²² counteracting stress.
- Rhythmic breathing increases heart rate variability, a marker of strong vagal tone and resilience.
- Diaphragmatic breathing massages the gut and internal organs, supporting digestion and gut-brain signaling.
- Breath also calms the limbic system — the emotional memory center where trauma grooves are stored — quieting reactivity and hypervigilance.
- At the same time, it re-engages the prefrontal cortex, the seat of focus and executive function, restoring clarity and choice in the moment.²³

Through these mechanisms, breath literally reshapes your chemistry — raising GABA, balancing serotonin, lowering cortisol, and rewiring the neural pathways that keep you in autopilot.

²² Zaccaro, A., et al. (2018). *How breath-control can change your life: A systematic review on psycho-physiological correlates of slow breathing*. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 12, 353.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2018.00353>

²³ Russo, M. A., Santarelli, D. M., & O'Rourke, D. (2017). The physiological effects of slow breathing in the healthy human. *Breathe*, 13(4), 298–309. European Respiratory Society. <https://doi.org/10.1183/20734735.009817>

Energetic Medicine

Breath is also energy. In spiritual traditions, it is referred to as *prana*, *qi*, or *ruach*. In Wild Moon Healing, breath is the lunar tide that rises and falls within us. Each inhale draws energy in; each exhale releases what no longer serves.

- In the head: Breath clears racing thoughts, grounding logic in calm.
- In the heart and lungs: Breath expands compassion, softens grief, and deepens connection.
- In the gut: Breath restores trust, intuition, and safety.

In this way, breath harmonizes the three centers of intelligence, weaving them back into a state of balance.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

Breath is a physical act and much more than oxygen; it is a spiritual conduit. Each inhale and exhale strengthen connection with the divine (head center), deepens compassion for self and others (heart center), and roots us in the wisdom of the earth and ancestors (gut center).

Practical Applications

1. The 4–6 Breath: Inhale for 4, exhale for 6. Strengthens vagal tone and soothes anxiety²⁴.
2. Box Breathing (4–4–4–4): Equal inhale, hold, exhale, hold. Balances energy and calms overactive sympathetic signals.
3. Somatic Breathwork: Active breathing patterns that help release trauma stored in the body, giving the vagus nerve space to reset.
4. Mindful Eating with Breath: Pausing to breathe before meals (3 deep breaths) activates parasympathetic digestion, helping proteins and nutrients do their work. Slowly inhaling through the nose while chewing enhances the senses to truly enjoy your nourishment.

²⁴ Russo, M. A., Santarelli, D. M., & O'Rourke, D. (2017). *The physiological effects of slow breathing in the healthy human*. *Breathe*, 13(4), 298–309. European Respiratory Society. <https://doi.org/10.1183/20734735.009817>

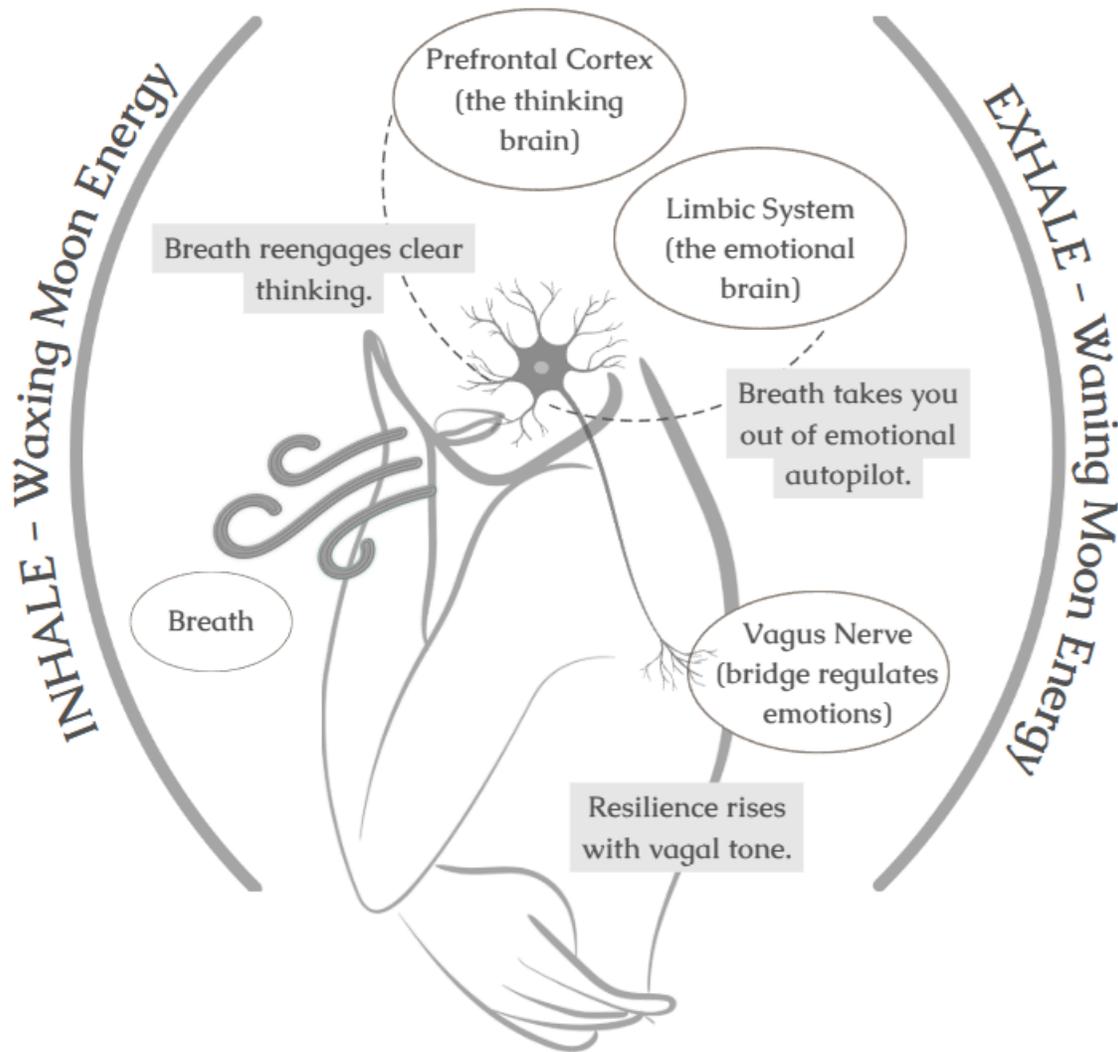


Figure 11 - Breath influences both the prefrontal cortex (clear thinking) and the limbic system (emotional memory/autopilot) through vagus nerve signaling. Inhale = waxing/waking energy; exhale = waning/settling energy. Together, breath restores resilience and balance.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

Breath is the moon’s rhythm inside your body. Just as lunar cycles guide the tides, breath guides your nervous system. It serves as both anchor and compass, reminding you that healing is not only chemical but also cyclical. Inhale is the waxing moon — building energy, growth, creation. Exhale is the waning moon — release, letting go, surrender. Just as the lunar cycle renews itself, each breath offers a chance to begin again — returning your body to its natural state of balance.

SECTION 10. Conclusion — Returning to Rhythm

Healing is not about becoming someone new or returning to who you once were, but remembering who you are when body, mind, and soul return to rhythm. Healing doesn't come from trying harder or relying on willpower to carve new neural pathways in the head. It comes from crossing the healing bridge with each breath and each meal—embodying change, not just thinking about it.



My own journey began in the body. Losing more than 100 pounds taught me discipline and resilience, but it also opened a doorway to something far deeper: the realization that healing is never just physical. True healing is about rhythm—the cadence between body and mind, breath and spirit, survival, and peace.

We have seen how proteins, enzymes, hormones, and neurotransmitters are not just chemical trivia but the fundamental language of mental health. We have traced the vagus nerve as it weaves between the head, heart, and gut, carrying messages of stress or safety. We have explored how the gut — our “second brain” — produces the very messengers that influence mood and resilience. And we have always returned to the breath — the one tool that enables us to consciously change our state of mind at any moment.

When you put this all together, a new truth emerges: diet is not separate from mental health. Breath is not separate from biology. Energy and science are not opposites, but reflections of the same whole. Research on the gut–brain axis affirms what healing practices have long known: what we eat and how we breathe truly shape the neural pathways that guide mood, resilience and peace.²⁵

Every meal is a chance to provide your body with proteins, fibers, and anti-inflammatory foods that stabilize mental well-being. Every breath is an opportunity to reset your nervous system, assess and strengthen vagal tone, and release what no longer serves you. Each inhale releases toxins and each exhale releases stress. Every moment of mindfulness is a step back into alignment.

²⁵ Margolis, K. G., Cryan, J. F., & Mayer, E. A. (2021). *The Microbiota–Gut–Brain Axis: From Motility to Mood*. *Gastroenterology*, 160(6), 1486–1499. Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1053/j.gastro.2020.10.066>

As physicist Max Planck once said: *“All matter originates and exists only by virtue of a force... we must assume behind this force the existence of a conscious and intelligent mind. The mind is the matrix of all matter.”* In other words, consciousness — your awareness, your rhythm — is the foundation of health and healing.

So, as you close these pages, pause. Place a hand on your heart, another on your belly. Take a slow, steady breath. In this moment, you are nourishing body, mind, and spirit. You are remembering — and reclaiming — your rhythm.

SECTION 11. Future Directions — From Knowledge to Practice

Future directions in this field point toward deeper integration of nutrition, vagus nerve science, and breathwork as pathways to mental and gut health.



The science of the gut–brain axis, proteins, and the vagus nerve is only beginning to unfold, and future research will continue to reveal how diet, breath, and environment shape resilience. Yet while the research evolves, we already know enough to begin living differently today.

At Wild Moon Healers®, I am bringing this science to life through courses, breathwork, Reiki, sound healing, and community circles. These offerings are not only educational but experiential — designed to help people reclaim their rhythm, calm their nervous systems, and live in harmony with body, mind, and soul.

While nutritional practice is not within the direct scope of Wild Moon Healers®, I personally follow a detox-and-rejuvenation program that supports cellular renewal and system-wide balance. I share about this part of my journey openly on social media (@wildmoonhealers), not as an affiliate, but simply as an extension of my commitment to holistic living.

Whether through future studies, new integrative therapies, or community-based healing, the direction is clear: food and breath are medicine, and when woven with energy awareness, they form a pathway back to clarity, resilience, and peace.

What's Next — Explore More Healing Bridges

This white paper is only the beginning. Healing does not live in words alone; it unfolds as rhythm, practice, and embodied experience.



If these pages have sparked curiosity or stirred something deeper within you, there's more to explore. Through Wild Moon Healers®, my holistic mental wellness platform, I've created a transformational healing ecosystem of writings, online resources, and healing services.

Here are some ways to continue the journey with me:

- **Related Blog Posts:** One example is: *The Healing Bridge: Why Willpower Isn't the Answer* — a reflection on why habits fail when we rely on the head alone, and how breath and nourishment create lasting change.
- **Free Masterclass:** [Reclaiming Your Rhythm](#) — a free recorded teaching on why the head seems to “win,” and how to restore harmony by crossing the healing bridge with food, breath, and awareness.
- **Books:** The [Wild Moon Healing series](#), including *Reclaiming Your Rhythm: Where Lunar Cycles, Chakra Wisdom, and Mental Health Align* — expanding on the themes you've encountered here.
- **Courses & Circles:** [Breathwork](#), [mirror meditation](#), and [The Energetic Path program](#), each designed to bring science, spirit, and practice together so you can live these principles, not just read about them.

Healing is not a destination but a cadence — a cycle of nourishment, breath, rest, and renewal. Each resource is an invitation to step more fully onto the bridge between head and body, thought and spirit, survival and peace.

My purpose is to hold a container where you feel safe, supported, and empowered — and I hope you take the next step in your journey with me.

Appendix A – Molecule Reference

Wild Moon Summary:

Proteins = the raw material.

Enzymes = the builders and cleaners.

Hormones = the messengers.

Neurotransmitters = the songs.

Vagus nerve = the bridge that carries the songs of calm or stress between body and mind.

When protein balance is off, the whole choir goes out of tune: neurotransmitters drop, inflammation rises, and the vagus nerve loses its steady rhythm. Balanced nourishment, rest, and conscious breath bring the system back into harmony.

Molecule	Nervous System	Gut-Brain Connection	Function	Mental Health	Protein Tie	Vagus Nerve Role
Proteins (general)	Shared / Regulatory (Balancing Both) - Provide raw material for all enzymes / hormones / neurotransmitters. Too little = weak vagal tone; too much = inflammation (which fuels sympathetic stress).	Gut-Linked Molecules (originate in or heavily involve the gut) - • Proteins from diet (amino acids) are broken down and absorbed in the stomach. • These amino acids are the raw material for neurotransmitters.	Builders/workers of the body: create structure, enzymes, and neurotransmitters	Deficiency → poor repair, low mood, anxiety; excess → inflammation	Made of amino acids; all body proteins need dietary protein	Supports neurotransmitter production & nerve structure
COMT (enzyme)	Sympathetic (Fight/Flight/Freeze — “the gas pedal”) - Clears dopamine/norepinephrine; imbalance = prolonged sympathetic activation.	Indirectly Gut-Related - Works mainly in the liver and brain, not directly gut-based.	Breaks down dopamine, norepinephrine (stress regulation)	Imbalance → prolonged stress, anxiety	Protein enzyme; requires amino acids & cofactors	Helps vagus reset after stress

MAO (enzyme)	Parasympathetic (Rest/Digest/Restore — “the brake”) - Helps maintain neurotransmitter balance → supports parasympathetic reset.	Indirectly Gut-Related - Found in many tissues, including the gut, but most studied in the brain.	Breaks down serotonin & dopamine	Imbalance → depression,	Protein enzyme; requires amino acids	Maintains neurotransmitter balance for calm signaling
Acetylcholinesterase (enzyme)	Parasympathetic (Rest/Digest/Restore — “the brake”) - Clears acetylcholine, fine-tunes vagal signaling.	Indirectly Gut-Related - Found where acetylcholine is active (including gut nerve endings), but not produced by the gut itself.	Clears acetylcholine after signaling	Imbalance → memory/focus issues	Protein enzyme	Regulates acetylcholine signal strength
Cortisol (hormone)	Sympathetic (Fight/Flight/Freeze — “the gas pedal”) - The classic stress hormone keeps you alert.	Indirectly Gut-Related - Produced by adrenal glands (not gut) but strongly influenced by gut health, microbiome, and vagus nerve signaling.	Stress hormone; mobilizes energy for fight/flight	High → anxiety, insomnia, burnout; dysregulated rhythm → depression	Receptors are proteins; signaling affects proteins	Vagus activation lowers cortisol
Insulin (hormone)	Shared / Regulatory (Balancing Both) - Blood sugar stability influences both calm (balanced) and stress (swings trigger the sympathetic response).	Gut-Linked Molecules (originate in or heavily involve the gut) - • Pancreas is part of the digestive system. • Insulin release is influenced by vagus nerve activity and gut signaling.	Regulates blood sugar levels	Swings → irritability, anxiety, fatigue	Insulin is a protein hormone	Vagus signals the pancreas; it influences insulin release
Oxytocin (hormone)	Parasympathetic (Rest/Digest/Restore — “the brake”) - Connection/bonding hormone, rises with vagal activation (touch, breath, safety).	Indirectly Gut-Related - Mainly produced in the hypothalamus, but gut bacteria may influence its release; vagal activation during digestion and safety cues can raise it.	Bonding hormone; supports trust & connection	Supports safety, reduces anxiety, fosters	Small protein (peptide) hormone	Released when vagus is stimulated by safety, touch, breath

<p>Serotonin (neurotransmitter)</p>	<p>Parasympathetic (Rest/Digest/Restore — “the brake”) - Gut–brain messenger for mood balance, sleep, digestion.</p>	<p>Gut-Linked Molecules (originate in or heavily involve the gut) - • ~90% made in the gut by enterochromaffin cells. • The vagus nerve carries gut serotonin signals to the brain.</p>	<p>Mood regulation, calm, sleep</p>	<p>Low → depression/anxiety; stable = calm</p>	<p>Made from tryptophan (an amino acid from protein)</p>	<p>The vagus nerve carries gut serotonin signals to the brain.</p>
<p>Dopamine (neurotransmitter)</p>	<p>Sympathetic (Fight/Flight/Freeze — “the gas pedal”) - Can push drive/reward-seeking into overdrive → anxiety or mania when high.</p>	<p>Gut-Linked Molecules (originate in or heavily involve the gut) - • Significant dopamine is produced in the gut; it interacts with gut motility and mood through vagal signaling.</p>	<p>Motivation, reward, focus</p>	<p>Low → apathy; high → anxiety/mania</p>	<p>Made from tyrosine (an amino acid from protein)</p>	<p>Gut dopamine interacts with vagus, affecting mood</p>
<p>GABA (neurotransmitter)</p>	<p>Parasympathetic (Rest/Digest/Restore — “the brake”) - Inhibitory → calms nervous system, supports sleep.</p>	<p>Gut-Linked Molecules (originate in or heavily involve the gut) - • Produced in the gut by microbes (microbiome) as well as by neurons. • Gut-derived GABA interacts with the vagus nerve to calm the nervous system.</p>	<p>Relaxation, calm, sleep</p>	<p>Low → anxiety, insomnia; balanced = deep calm</p>	<p>Made from glutamine (an amino acid from protein)</p>	<p>Enhances vagal tone → deep calm</p>

<p>Acetylcholine (neurotransmitter)</p>	<p>Parasympathetic (Rest/Digest/Restore — “the brake”) - The vagus nerve’s primary messenger signals rest & digest.</p>	<p>Gut-Linked Molecules (originate in or heavily involve the gut) - • Though made in nerve endings, the vagus nerve’s “voice” carries it into gut function (peristalsis, digestion). • Strong gut tie because it regulates “rest and digest.”</p>	<p>Primary vagus nerve messenger: rest & digest</p>	<p>Supports learning, focus, calm</p>	<p>Receptors are proteins built with choline input</p>	<p>It is the vagus nerve’s primary chemical messenger</p>
<p>Vagus Nerve</p>	<p>Shared / Regulatory (Balancing Both) - Acts as the mediator, constantly sensing the body and sending signals to balance both branches.</p>	<p>Gut-Linked Molecules (originate in or heavily involve the gut) - • One end originates in the brainstem, the other branches deeply into the gut — making it the literal bridge between the two brains.</p>	<p>Bridge between brain, gut, heart; regulates calm, digestion, healing</p>	<p>Strong tone = resilience, weak tone = anxiety, trauma, depression</p>	<p>Nerve fibers are built from proteins; myelin requires protein for stability</p>	<p>Central pathway for mind-body calm connection</p>

Appendix B – Figure A1. Proteins, Amino Acids, and Neurotransmitter Pathways for Mental Health

DIETARY PROTEIN (FOOD)

This is where it all begins



AMINO ACIDS (BUILDING BLOCKS)

Tryptophan — Serotonin

Tyrosine — Dopamine

Glutamine — GABA

Choline — Acetylcholine

Proteins are broken down into amino acids, and these are the “precursors” for mood-regulating neurotransmitters.

NEUROTRANSMITTERS

Serotonin — Calm, sleep, mood regulation

Dopamine — Motivation, focus, reward

GABA — Relaxation, deep calm

Acetylcholine — Learning, focus, parasympathetic

“rest & digest” messenger

MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

Balanced = resilience, calm, clarity

Deficiency or imbalance = anxiety, depression, stress reactivity

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About the Author

Donna S. Conley is the founder of Wild Moon Healers®, a holistic mental wellness platform that weaves together lunar cycles, chakra alchemy, somatic practices, and evidence-based mental health strategies. She is a trauma-informed somatic breathwork facilitator, a certified USUI Holy Fire® Reiki Master, a sound healer, a meditation teacher, and a Duke-trained health and wellness coach.

Donna is also the award-winning, national best-selling author of the Wild Moon Healing book series and creator of The Energetic Path course. These act as a guide that helps you align with the moon's rhythm to heal, grow, and embody your most authentic self. Her work is rooted in compassion, energetic integrity, and the belief that science and spirituality are not opposites but partners in transformation helping people reclaim their rhythm.

Through her writing, courses, and community, she helps people reclaim their rhythm — in body, mind, and spirit — and live in harmony with both inner cycles and the cycles of nature. Her work bridges evidence-based research with integrative practices, making her a sought-after speaker and educator in both wellness and mental health communities.

Find her at www.wildmoonhealers.com, on social media @wildmoonhealers, or inside her online membership, The Wild Moon Collective.

Wild Moon Healing Lens:

If you're ready to bring these insights into your own life, I offer courses, breathwork, Reiki, and sound healing to help you reclaim your rhythm. Nutrition is outside my scope, but if you have specific questions, I can connect you with trusted resources to support your journey.

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