How to Treat with Reflexology for Anxiety during Self-Isolation

By Lee Anthony Taylor

Whether we are talking about these turbulent times, or any other times of stress, it is important to recognise the areas of your life you can have control over.

The chattering mind may try to convince us that the days ahead are dark but there are ways in which you can fill your time and make the situation lighter.

Self-treatment during this time of lockdown is invaluable, not least because you maintain your own connection with your reflexology work. Another benefit may be for those isolated with you: they get to fully appreciate reflexology without having to rush off somewhere straight after. Indeed this whole experience is encouraging us all to look for the calm within the perceived chaos and you may have some new converts to the therapy after this has all passed!

So if you are fortunate enough to have a clinic room, or can just work from home, get out the paper roll, talcs and creams, and carry on regardless. The positive feeling from staying active will also bring benefits as well.

I have some powerful reflex techniques to share with you, along with key reflexes to treat, as we adjust to this period of uncertainty.

Anxiety interrupts the ebb and flow in our **breathing mechanism** and creates disease patterns within the **lung energy** and its **ancillary organs** – and it is in **this area** that I wish to discuss how we as reflexologists can help to redress the imbalance.

My advice is to focus on the **lungs** and the **respiratory apparatus** (as they are direct reflexes) but, since we are a connected whole, think outside the box – look to reflexes for the appropriate **nerve supply**, the **endocrine** system, the **muscular** system and the **lymphatic** system to augment the work you are doing.

This will benefit you (or the person in your chair) at a physical, mental and emotional level, whilst helping to bolster the spiritual links we are relying on at the moment. If we look at a few examples, we will see how different systems of the body interact during a crisis of confidence and which reflexes we should use to help and reassure.

Anxiety will run tension through the body and impact different muscles. People feel the tightness in other areas. Some will feel it in their **neck**, **jaw**, **chest**, or the **stomach**. There is no specific area – wherever the brain sends the nerve signals. So work the appropriate direct reflexes.

Remember the **skin** is the 'third lung' so eruptions or rashes on the surface may be an indication of the stress that the lung energy is being subjected to from the anxiety. Vital clues always work their way to the extremities in order for us to take note and make changes. Skin conditions are almost invariably lung energy imbalances.

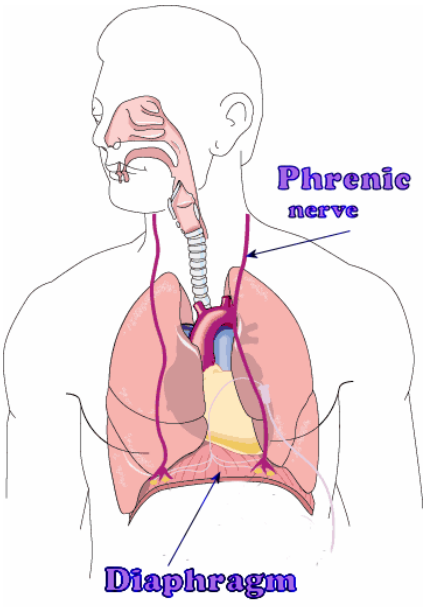
One key physical area to consider is the **diaphragm** and its **associated nervous systems**. The **phrenic** and **vagus** nerves are involved in the respiratory functions of the diaphragm and work in perfect synergy. The innervation of the diaphragm muscle by the phrenic nerve is believed to be directly responsible for the emotional state of the patient. Further evidence reinforces this: the phrenic nerve forms ganglia underneath the diaphragm and is connected with the neural pathways of the **adrenal gland**, which of course registers fear or fright. The diaphragm receives messages from above and below! So that explains why **working the adrenal gland reflexes** is useful in cases of anxiety.

Physiologically, the relationship between the breath and the emotions involves a complex interaction between the brainstem and the limbic area and the cerebral cortex. The **amygdala**, which is part of the limbic system, is connected to the respiratory areas, such as the medulla oblongata, and is considered the most

important area in managing the ‘emotional’ breath. This emotional breath is stimulated by dopamine, giving us hormonal biofeedback implications to consider in our case taking.

Another area for evaluation is the **heart** and blood pressure. There is a close relationship between the emotions, the breath and the intervention of baroreceptors. These are special receptors that detect changes in your blood pressure. Important ones are found in the aorta and the carotid sinus. If the blood pressure within these vessels increases, for instance as a result of anxiety or panic, the walls of the arteries stretch and stimulate increased activity within these baroreceptors to try and restore homeostatis.

As previously mentioned, the paired phrenic nerves are the only nerves that directly control the diaphragm, and therefore have a critical role in breathing. As well as this, they also have sensory functions and are responsible for the referred pain to the shoulder that can accompany abdominal disorders. So think **abdominal problems** and then trace it back to anxiety and diaphragm stress.



If there are **neck problems** in your patient, think about the cervical vertebrae having a knock-on effect for exacerbating anxiety. Innervating from the cervical spine (C3 to C5), the phrenic nerves are susceptible to injury as they travel down the neck (the internal jugular vein) and along the **scalene muscle** to insert in the diaphragm, left and right, to control contraction and inspiration.

Damage to the nerves due to trauma, infection or neuromuscular diseases can lead to partial or total paralysis of one or both sides of the diaphragm. The phrenic nerves are also the nerves responsible for the hiccups, which is a spasm of the diaphragm.

As you will see from the diagram, the right phrenic nerve courses along the pericardium of the right atrium of the heart, whereas left phrenic nerve tracks along the pericardium of the left ventricle both of them inserting into the inferior surface of the diaphragm at zone 2/3.

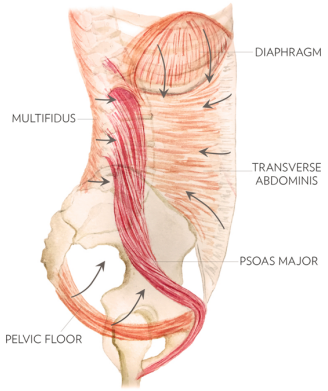
The Vagus Nerve and Diaphragmatic Breathing

There is also an overlap in the work of the tenth cranial nerve, the **vagus** nerve and combatting anxiety. The role of the vagus nerve in the parasympathetic nervous system is to slow the sympathetic stress response. When someone is extremely anxious, the vagus nerve can get overstimulated as it works to bring down heart rate and blood pressure. This may cause someone's heartbeat to slow down too much, meaning that blood pressure can plummet. Under these conditions, not enough blood reaches the head, causing them to faint.

Deep diaphragmatic breathing, which requires a long, slow outbreath, is vital to stimulating the vagus nerve and slowing heart rate and blood pressure, especially in times of performance anxiety.
Incorrect breathing can cause anxiety, stress and even depression. It works like this: Momentary stress causes the body to tense and you begin to breathe a little more shallowly. A shallow breath lowers oxygen levels in the blood, which the brain senses as stress. Breathing then becomes a little faster and shallower. The London Pain Clinic has recognised that deep diaphragmatic breathing helps to significantly reduce pain.

The Role of the Solar Plexus and the Psoas Muscle

An essential part of the body's nervous system, the **solar plexus** plays a large role in keeping our organs functioning smoothly and preparing the body to respond to stress by making changes in metabolism. At times, the solar plexus causes changes in the body in response to stress and produces a fight-or-flight response. Therapists have used solar plexus breathing techniques to assist in reducing stress levels. Look at my diagram to see a suggested new position for the **Solar Plexus reflex**.



The **psoas muscle** is attached to the diaphragm through fascia and ligaments. With each breathe, psoas and diaphragm work together to provide anterior spinal stability. The psoas major is a large muscle that attaches at the bottom of the thoracic spine (T12 and diaphragm) and along the lumbar spine (through L4), then runs through the pelvic bowl, down over the front of the hip joint, and attaches at the top of the femur (thigh bone). It is the only muscle connecting the spine to the leg. When you straighten your spine and breathe in you are flexing the combination between diaphragm and psoas.

Remember – nothing exists in isolation: when one body part is under stress it has an effect on somewhere else in the body. We may know these in reflexology terms as cross reflexes or, as I call them, correspondences. There is a sacred geometry of the anatomy with shoulders and hips, cranial base and pelvic bowl, the scapula/clavicle and the iliac crest all being related. Work the direct reflexes and have a try with these other suggestions.

Key Reflexes to treat – summary

What kind of pressure should I use?

A word of advice when working on nerve reflexes, visualize how delicate they are and adjust your intention to a gentle treatment with lighter touch.

If you are working a reflex area that would normally be involved in stretching (ie a muscle such as the diaphragm or psoas) then why not consider a kneading movement across the reflex to open up the area.

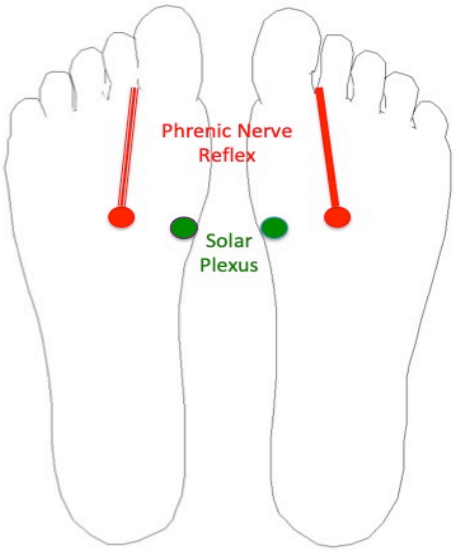
Treat the lung as a muscle and knead with your thumbs in an upwards direction towards the trachea on the medial edge. Notice that while you are doing this, your fingers are on the top of the foot applying reflex work to the appropriate lymphatic reflexes.

Checklist

- ✓ Lungs and Lymphatic area
- ✓ Phrenic Nerve (see diagram and description)
- ✓ Vagus Nerve (found on the top of each little toe – tenth cranial nerve)
- ✓ The Limbic System of the Brain (found in the centre of the pad of the big toe)
- ✓ My suggestion for the Solar Plexus (see diagram for phrenic nerve)
- ✓ Cervical Spine
- ✓ T12 – L4 spinal junction of diaphragm and psoas
- ✓ Psoas (see description)
- ✓ Shoulder Girdle
- ✓ Diaphragm
- ✓ Pelvic Girdle
- ✓ Adrenal Gland

Where do I find the reflexes…?

Have a look at the phrenic nerve reflexes and you will see that their end points are in Zone 2/3 on the diaphragm line. This is where traditionally therapists may have considered the solar plexus reflex to be. The phrenic nerve breathing exercise – by pushing with the thumb while flexing at the ankle – is highly effective for anxiety. Anatomically, the phrenic nerve traces pericardial branches down the right hand side into zone 2/3 of the right foot (right atrium) and the left foot (left ventricle). The solar plexus is found on the medial edge at diaphragm level – half on the right and half on the right.



The Psoas muscle reflex is mirrored by tracking the line of the Abductor Hallucis on the top of the foot, on the medial edge, from the top of the talus down to the articulation between the medial cuneiform and the first metatarsal (the bony projection on the dorsal aspect).

Lee Anthony Taylor is a UK-based, internationally-renowned speaker, presenter, author and teacher within the reflexology world who still retains his roots as a practitioner.

His work takes him all over the world where his unique teaching style has been universally acclaimed for its simplicity and its highly-effective delivery.

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