

## Completing the Stress Cycle

Understanding the difference between a stressor and a the physiological stress reaction it causes can change your entire experience of stress.



**Stressors** = Events, internal or external, that activate an autonomic stress reaction in your body



**Stress Reaction** = Neurological and physiological reactions to encountering a perceived threat

When we approach stress, we often take a problem-solving approach to the stressor. If we recognize our physiological reaction to stress as different than the stressor itself, we can include an approach of completing the stress cycle. When we do this, we gain greater access to our internal resources of intelligence, insight, clarity, wisdom, and compassion in approaching the stressor. We return our bodies and brains to a state where they can think, feel, and respond effectively to the stressor at hand.

Below are seven ways you can complete the stress cycle – reducing or resolving the physiological reaction itself after a stressor.

For more information, we recommend *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle* by Drs. Emily and Amelia Nagoski.

### 1: Physical Activity

Why?

This is the most efficient way to complete the stress cycle. It digests adrenaline and stress hormones and resets the brain.

How?

Use the major muscle groups in the arms and legs. Try to also increase your heart rate.  
Examples: Walking, running, biking, hiking, gardening, cleaning, dancing, kick-boxing.

## 2: Breathing

Why?

Deep, slow breaths downregulate the stress reaction.

How?

Try:  
Breathing breaks  
Paced breathing  
Abdominal breathing  
4-4-8 breathing  
Simple yoga breathing  
[Instructions can be found here](#)

## 3: Positive Social Interaction

Why?

Social interactions can cue us to recognize the world as a trustworthy, low-threat place, which resets our nervous system.

How?

This can be anything from a positive exchange with the grocery clerk to a long talk with a good friend.

## 4: Laughter

Why?

Deep belly laughter is a key to reinforcing social bonds and regulating emotions. It creates a sense of safety and ease.

How?

Try watching a funny movie, a comedian, or telling your troubles to a friend in a way you can both laugh about.

## 5: Affection

Why? { The Drs. Nagoski share, “When friendly chit-chat with colleagues doesn’t cut it, and you’re too stressed out for laughter, deeper connection with a loving presence is called for.”

How? { Try “hugging until relaxed.” Hug a loved one for 20 seconds or until you both relax, while both of you are standing in your center of balance.  
Spend time petting your pet.

## 6: Creative Self-Expression

Why? { Creativity provides a context where big emotions can be externalized and integrated.

How? { Try: painting, writing, drawing, crafting, or cooking. Use your imagination to create alternative endings to your stressors – including ones that make you laugh.

## 7: Cry

Why? { The physiological release of crying can be an important completion to a stress reaction. Crying releases the stress hormones accumulated in the stress reaction.

How? { Try crying without focusing on the story related to the stressor, but simply paying gentle, kind attention to the sensations in the body.