

Completing the Stress Cycle

Stress is a normal, healthy response to threat. When we perceive a threat, there is a physical response of a cascade of activity in our body that includes hormones and neurological activity. Adrenaline and cortisol signal the system to release epinephrine (helps increase blood flow in our muscles), glucocorticoids (give us energy to keep going) and endorphins to help prevent us from feeling pain and discomfort.

A stress cycle has a beginning (signal of threat), middle (fight or flight) and end, which is a return to safety. For many of us, our stress cycle becomes interrupted part way through and we don't complete the cycle and return to safety and connection. There are many good reasons we can't complete the cycle. But all of those signals and chemicals become trapped in our body and build up and harm us over time.

Fortunately we can do things that can help us complete the stress cycle, even long after the situation is over. Here are some activities that can be used to help.

1. **Intense physical activity.** The threat response is set up to help us with "fight or flight" and so physical activity can help us work out some of the hormones, etc. At the end of intense physical activity, we can do something that helps us notice safety to complete the cycle.
2. **Breathing.** A strong intake of oxygen with a long exhale is one of the gentlest, easiest ways to complete a stress cycle.
3. **Positive social interaction.** Spending time with someone that gives your nervous system the signal that you are not alone and that you are safe.

4. **Laughter.** A good old belly laugh. Not the nervous type, but the one that can make your eyes water and belly hurt. It is impossible to feel threat and belly laugh at the same time.
5. **Affection.** A long hug or a long kiss will help your system shift to safety (as long as you choose the right person to share affection with). This can also work with a pet.
6. **Crying.** Trying to allow yourself the tears when the urge hits you. Focus on the sensation of crying (the tears, the stuffy nose, the tight throat) and not the issue that made you cry and you will move through the cycle within 2–3 minutes and feel relief.
7. **Creative expression.** Writing, art, music, particularly in a way that encourages the expression of emotion and passion.

You will know you have completed a stress cycle when you feel a shift in your nervous system. It may be subtle, and it might be a strong sense of relief.

**Important note. Any opportunity to complete a stress cycle is a healthy release of pressure we hold in our body that will hurt us over time. But many of us, and the people we support, become stuck because we are stuck in a stress-activating situation. This is not a failure to release stress or to feel better, but rather just a reflection that the burden on our system is so great and outpaces our ability to process it.*

This information is borrowed heavily from the book "Burnout" by Emily and Amelia Nagoski

