
Understanding the Stress Cycle

Understanding the difference between a **stressor** and the **physiological stress reaction** (a neurological and physiological response to encountering a perceived threat) that stressor causes can completely shift how you experience stress.

We often focus on solving the stressor, the external problem in front of us. But when we recognize that the physiological stress reaction is a **separate internal process**, we can intentionally **complete the stress cycle**. Doing so helps restore clarity, insight, wisdom, and compassion, and brings both body and brain back to a state where we can respond more effectively.

A great resource to learn more about completing the stress cycle is Dr. Brené Brown's **Unlocking Us** podcast episode featuring Emily and Amelia Nagoski, authors of ***Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle***. One quote from the conversation stands out: "The stress itself will kill you faster than the stressor will—unless you do something to complete the stress response cycle. While you're managing the day's stressors, it's absolutely essential to your well-being that you give your body the resources it needs to complete the stress response cycles that have been activated."

Seven Ways to Complete the Stress Cycle

1. Physical Movement

Why? Movement is the most efficient way; it digests stress hormones and resets the brain.

How? It uses the major muscle groups in arms and legs; increases heart rate. Try walking, running, biking, hiking, gardening, cleaning, dancing, kick-boxing.

2. Breathing

Why? Deep, slow breaths down-regulate the stress response.

How? Try paced breathing, abdominal breathing, 4-4-8 breathing, simple yoga breathing.

3. Positive Social Interaction

Why? Social interaction signals to your nervous system that the environment is safe and supportive.

How? Even brief positive interactions (like with a grocery clerk) can help.

4. Laughter

Why? Deep belly laughter regulates emotions and strengthens social bonds.

How? Watch a funny movie, a comedian, or share humor with a friend.

5. Affection

Why? Deep connection with a loving presence calms the nervous system.

How? Try "hugging until relaxed" for 20 seconds; spending time with a pet.

6. Creative Self-Expression

Why? Creativity helps externalize emotions and integrate them safely.

How? Painting, writing, drawing, crafting, cooking, or imagining endings to stressful situations.

7. Crying

Why? Crying releases accumulated stress hormones.

How? Let yourself cry without focusing on the story; just notice your body with kindness.

Completing the Stress Cycle - Check in with Yourself

1. What stress responses are you experiencing today?

- Tension in body 
- Irritability 
- Trouble focusing 
- Fatigue 
- Feeling disconnected 



Write a few words describing your stress right now:

Rate your stress level from a scale of 1-10: _____

2. Choose stress cycle completion activities

Pick one or more for today (or several for this week):

- Physical movement 
- Deep breathing 
- Creativity 
- Connection 
- Affection 
- Crying/laughing  / 



Which activities will you use this week?

3. How to notice you've completed the stress cycle

- Feeling of lightness or relief ✨
- Warmth in chest ❤️
- Improved mood 😊
- Less tension - an audible sigh 🗝️
- Sense of grounding 🧘



Have you noticed any of these?

After completing the activities, rate your stress level from 1-10. Is it lower than before? _____

Resilient Helper Recommended Supports (Anoka County)

“Take your broken heart and turn it into art” is one example of how completing the stress cycle can involve creativity. Here are some local resources that align with Resilient Helper values: creativity, movement, connection, nervous system care.

Art Lab Rx (Blaine, MN)

Trauma-informed creative sessions designed to support emotional regulation and stress recovery. Free open sessions on 1st and 3rd Fridays. [\[artlabrx.com\]](https://artlabrx.com)

The PARC – Recovery & Fitness Center (Blaine, MN)

Sauna, cold plunge, movement classes, open gym, and quiet reset spaces — supporting stress-cycle completion. [\[theparcmn.com\]](https://theparcmn.com)

Pressed Hot Yoga & Juice (Blaine, MN)

Hot yoga, gentle flow, barre, and restorative movement classes that help discharge physical tension. [\[pressedmn.com\]](https://pressedmn.com)

Rumriver Art Center (Anoka, MN)

Art workshops, open studio, pottery, and mixed-media sessions for expressive stress release. [\[rumriverart.com\]](https://rumriverart.com)

Green Amethyst Art Therapy (Anoka, MN)

Individual and group art-therapy sessions led by a registered art therapist for emotional release and grounding. [\[greenamethysthealing.com\]](https://greenamethysthealing.com)

Safe and Sound Protocol (Online tool)

An evidence-based listening therapy for helpers, designed to shift the nervous system from defense to regulation. [\[integratedlistening.com/products/ssp-safe-sound-protocol\]](https://integratedlistening.com/products/ssp-safe-sound-protocol)