The Physiological Sigh

NEW YORK STATE | Office of Mental Health

New York State Trauma-Informed Network & Resource Center

ABOUT THIS TOOL

Audience
EMT's, firefighters, emergency dispatchers, paramedics, ER workers, ICU teams, police safety aids, police officers, and others who identify as emergency service workers

Description
The physiological sigh is a breathing pattern your body actually does on its own when you're under pressure (like when you're about to cry or when you sigh after something stressful). The difference is that doing it on purpose gives you the control to calm your nervous system.

When to Use

- After a tense or high-pressure moment when your body is still in "alert mode"
- During long shifts when energy is low and focus starts to slip
- When you notice your breathing feels tight, shallow, or rushed
- Before re-engaging with a person or situation that requires your full attention
- When tunnel vision sets in and you need to quickly broaden your awareness

WORKPLACE STRESS

Stress doesn't just spike during emergencies. For first responders and shift workers, stress builds up slowly over hours — like water filling a cup. You may not feel it until it overflows. When stress peaks, your body's fight-or-flight response raises your heart rate, tightens muscles, and narrows your focus — which can affect judgment and reaction time.

Using short resets help keep the cup from getting full in the first place.

- Resilience isn't about being tough enough to ignore stress. It's about learning to move through stress so it doesn't get stuck in your body. This exercise is one small way to do that.
- You don't have to feel stressed to use this. Think of it like stretching before a workout — it's just maintenance. The more consistently you use it, the more your nervous system learns to regulate itself, even in high-pressure moments.

THE PRACTICE

1. Breathe in deeply through your nose — fill your lungs as much as you can
2. Before you exhale, sneak in one more short inhale — just a quick top-off to fully expand your lungs
3. Slowly breathe all the way out — make the exhale as long and steady as you can
4. Let your tongue drop away from the roof of your mouth — this is a spot where tension hides without you realizing it

That's it. Three rounds. Less than two minutes.

WHY THIS HELPS

This practice interrupts the stress response quickly by triggering the body's natural calm-down system through controlled breathing. Within a minute or two, heart rate drops, muscles loosen, and mental clarity returns — so you can go back to work more focused, physically steady, and less likely to make stress-driven mistakes.

WHY THIS WORKS

- Breathing and brain function are directly linked — how you breathe affects how you think and feel
- Shallow breathing keeps the body in “alert mode,” slowly draining energy and narrowing focus over time
- The double inhale reopens small air sacs in the lungs that partially collapse under stress
- The long exhale activates the body’s natural calming system, signaling that it is safe to relax
- The result is a quick, natural shift from wired or foggy to calm and focused

Resources:
Find additional wellness information on the NYS Trauma Informed Network and Resource Center at traumainformedny.org

Looking to go deeper?
Explore BREATH-BODY-MIND™ (BBM) for weekly breathwork practice, expert tips, and a welcoming community.
Check out the website here for additional details.

Sources:
Huberman, A. D. (2021, April 7). *Reduce Anxiety & Stress with the Physiological Sigh | Huberman Lab Quantal Clip* [Video]. YouTube.
Huberman, A. D., & Feldman Barrett, L. (2022). Physiological sigh and stress regulation. *Cell Reports Medicine.*