Quick Reset: 3 Physiological Sighs

Office of Mental Health | New York State Trauma-Informed Network & Resource Center

ABOUT THIS TOOL

Audience
- Physicians/Practitioners, Nursing Staff, and Allied Health Professionals
- Personal Care Workers and Support Technicians
- Support and Administrative Staff

Description
Quick reset tools provide brief, practical ways to interrupt that stress cycle during a shift.

When to Use
Working long and unpredictable hours with limited breaks
- Managing high volume workload
- Managing high intensity workload

WORKPLACE STRESS

Healthcare professionals often work in environments that require constant watchfulness, emotional control, and rapid decision-making. These demands can keep the nervous system in a prolonged state of activation. When the body stays in this “always on” mode, stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol can stay elevated for long periods of time. Over time, this can lead to fatigue, irritability, muscle tension, and difficulty focusing.

Healthcare work keeps the nervous system in:

High vigilance

Healthcare workers must constantly scan for changes in patients, alarms, and new information. This keeps the brain in “watch mode” for long periods of time. Over time, this level of alertness can feel exhausting and make it harder to relax, even after the shift ends.

Emotional containment

Clinicians often manage strong emotions while staying calm and professional. They may comfort patients and families while holding in their own reactions. This emotional effort takes energy and can build up throughout the day if there are no chances to release or reset.

Rapid decision-making mode

Healthcare settings require quick thinking and fast problem-solving. The brain stays in a high-speed thinking state, which uses a lot of mental energy. Without small breaks, this can lead to mental fatigue and reduced focus later in the shift.

Quick reset tools provide brief, practical ways to interrupt that stress cycle during a shift. Techniques like the physiological sigh use controlled breathing to quickly lower stress chemistry in the body. This helps clinicians regain focus, steady their breathing, and reset their nervous system in under a minute. With regular use, these short resets can help prevent stress from building up across a long and demanding workday.

THE PRACTICE

1. Inhale through nose
2. Short top-up inhale
3. Long exhale through mouth
4. Repeat 3 times

WHY THIS HELPS

Lengthening the exhale → Activates the body's calming response
A longer exhale signals the nervous system that the body is safe. This helps slow the heart rate and breathing, shifting the body out of "fight-or-flight" and into a calmer state.

Releasing muscle tension → Reduces stress signaling in the body
Stress often shows up as tight shoulders, jaw tension, or shallow breathing. Intentional breathing helps muscles relax, which sends feedback to the brain that the threat has passed.

Creating small transitions → Prevents cumulative overload
Short resets act like mini breaks for the nervous system. They help you mentally "close" one patient interaction before starting the next. This prevents stress from stacking up across the shift and supports clearer thinking and steadier communication.

WHY THIS WORKS

The physiological sigh uses controlled breathing to quickly lower stress chemistry in the body. This helps healthcare workers regain focus, steady their breathing, and reset their nervous system in under a minute. This technique quickly lowers stress chemistry and helps the body shift out of "fight-or-flight" mode. The longer exhale signals the brain that it is safe to relax. This slows the heart rate, releases tight muscles, and improves mental clarity. Even a few breaths can help you feel more grounded and better able to think clearly before the next task. With regular use, these short resets can help prevent stress from building up across a long and demanding workday.

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:
Andrew Huberman (2023). Stanford neuroscience research on physiological sigh breathing.
Vlemincx, E., et al. (2013). Why do we sigh? *Frontiers in Psychology*. Explains the regulatory function of sigh breathing.