Quick Reset: Handwashing

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

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WORKPLACE STRESS

Healthcare work keeps the nervous system in a near-constant state of:

High vigilance
Always scanning for risk, change, and urgency

Emotional containment
Holding space for others while suppressing your own reactions

Rapid decision-making mode
Continuous problem solving with real consequences

Your brain does not automatically get a “reset” between patients. Without intentional transitions, stress accumulates quietly across the shift. Handwashing is a routine part of healthcare work and can serve as a natural moment for a brief emotional and physiological reset between patient encounters. By pairing slow breathing with the physical act of washing hands, healthcare workers can release muscle tension and mentally separate from the previous interaction before moving on to the next. This short pause helps create a clear transition, allowing healthcare staff to reset their nervous system, reduce accumulated stress, and approach the next patient with renewed focus and presence.

THE PRACTICE

While Washing Hands:

1. Inhale slowly through your nose
2. Exhale even more slowly through your mouth (longer than the inhale)
3. Drop your shoulders away from your ears
4. Unclench your jaw and soften your tongue
5. Mentally say: *This patient interaction stays here*

This takes 15–20 seconds but signals to your nervous system that the moment is complete.

WHY THIS HELPS

- Creates tiny emotional off-ramps during the day
- Reduces cumulative stress load and compassion fatigue
- Prevents emotional carryover from patient to patient
- Helps the body exit fight-or-flight more often
- Builds a habit of safe, repeatable nervous-system regulation

Think of this as a **mini handoff** for your nervous system — not just for the patient.

WHY THIS WORKS

This short reset creates an emotional boundary between encounters. It helps your brain and body mark the end of one interaction before beginning the next. Instead of carrying emotional residue forward, you create a clean mental transition.

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:
Herbert Benson (1975). *The Relaxation Response*. New York: HarperCollins.
Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994). *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. Hyperion.
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *Hand Hygiene in Healthcare Settings*.