



Building Mental Health and Energy Resilience to Ignite Best Thinking

It starts with creating a Thinking Environment™

The quality of our doing depends on the quality of our thinking.

Author Nancy Kline's stunning observation gave rise to 10 behaviours that generate best thinking. Today, we are talking about attention.

To build energy resilience, we need to think about the quality of attention we give ourselves.

In today's 'always-on' society, we get caught up in a cycle of doing and often forget to give ourselves quality attention – the time and space to pause and check in on how we are feeling. Think about how we often get sick when we go on leave. It's not that it happens suddenly, our bodies have probably been sending signals for weeks.

We need to start listening to our bodies and paying attention to the signs of stress and how the symptoms manifest. If left unattended, stress can become chronic and lead to burnout.

Let's start by exploring different types of stress – because not all stress is bad.

3 Types of Stress:

1. Eustress

The opposite of distress, eustress or “good stress” is associated with positive experiences.

“It’s the kind of stress we feel when we are on a roller-coaster or at an interview,” explains Health Psychologist and Stanford Professor, Kelly McGonigal.

In many ways, eustress resembles distress. We may feel nervous, our hearts may pound and thoughts may race. The difference is how these physical sensations are perceived. With distress, we may feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed. With eustress, we are much more likely to feel excitement or a sense of positive anticipation.

Eustress is important to our wellbeing – helping us stay motivated and develop resilience.

2. Acute

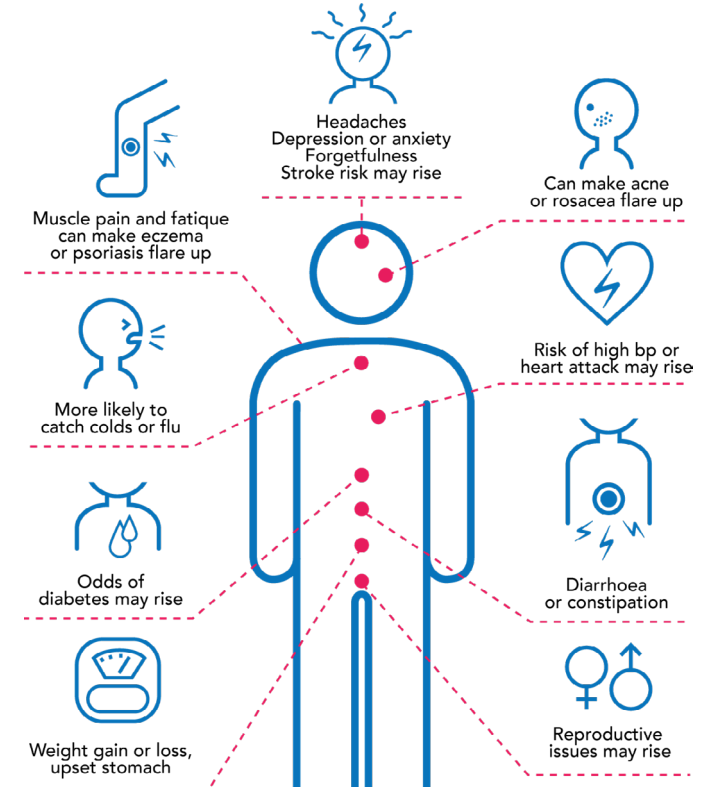
Acute stress results from our body’s reaction to a new or challenging situation. It’s that feeling we get from an approaching deadline or narrowly avoiding being hit by a car. Acute stress is classified as short-term stress. Usually, our emotions and body return to their normal state relatively soon.

3. Chronic

Chronic stress is the result of stressors that continue for long periods of time and is harmful to our mental and physical health. Think about financial worries, living in a high-crime neighbourhood or constantly fighting with a life partner.

The stress hormones that are released to help the mind and body prepare for a challenging situation continue to be released when the stress is ongoing. As a result, the constant flood of hormones build up over time and significantly deteriorate our physical and emotional well-being.

We all experience stressors in life that activate our stress response. Some are external, like work, money, children, crime and climate change. Others are internal, such as self-criticism or trauma.



We need to understand what our internal and external stressors are before we can move on to dealing with them effectively. What are some of your internal and external stressors?

Dealing with Stress

Drs Emily and Amelia Nagoski authored an excellent book on the subject exploring the causes of burnout and how to solve the stress cycle.

When we face anything that the brain perceives as a threat (stressor), stress is the body's natural response. It's a chemical 'stew' of neurotransmitters designed to help us survive. Our heart rate increases, blood flow spikes, stress hormones such as adrenaline are released, and the body gets ready to respond in one of three ways: fight, flight, or freeze.

The brain is unable to differentiate between a real threat (being charged by a hippo) and a perceived threat (being put on the spot in a meeting). This means that while modern-day stressors like meetings and deadlines are not the same life-threatening stressors faced by our ancestors, the body responds in the same way. What's more, your body holds onto that stress until it receives the message that you're safe.

This is what the Nagoskis describe as completing the stress cycle.

If you get stuck in a chronic or prolonged stress response, it depletes your body's physical, psychological, and emotional resources. Think of your emotions as a tunnel with a beginning, middle and end. Emotional exhaustion and burnout happen when you get stuck in the middle of an emotion tunnel. To get through the tunnel and overcome stress, you need to do something to tell your body you're safe.

And here's the good news – if you learn to pay attention to your body and develop effective strategies to complete your stress cycles, you will be equipped to manage life's inevitable stressors, avoid burnout and do your best thinking.



10 Strategies to reduce stress and avoid burnout

(adapted from the book *Burnout: the secret to unlocking the stress cycle*)



1. Physical Activity

Getting physical is the most effective way to complete the stress cycle. Engaging in any form of movement releases several important chemicals called neurotransmitters throughout our nervous systems. Endorphins and dopamine are the most common neurotransmitters and play a vital role in mood improvement and regulating critical body functions.

Exercise also promotes neuroplasticity, which plays a huge role in learning new skills, activities and languages. By increasing oxygen to the brain, it improves your memory, thinking agility and self-control.

Whether it's walking, running, cycling, dancing or stretching, you will feel better. Aim for 20 to 60 minutes a day.



2. Breathing

Breathing regulates our nervous system. Deep, slow breaths control the stress response - especially when the exhalation extends to the end of the breath and your belly contracts.

Breathing is most effective when your stress isn't that high or when you just need to siphon off the very worst of the stress to get through a difficult situation. A simple, practical exercise is to breathe in on a slow count of five, hold that breath for five, then exhale for a slow count of ten, and pause for another count of five. Repeat for two minutes.





3. Positive Social Interaction

Connections matter. When we connect with someone we feel lighter and more joyful. Even seemingly small moments of connection have a positive effect, for example, saying hello to someone walking by or complimenting a colleague.

Casual but friendly social interaction is the first external sign reassuring your brain that the world is a safe place and that you belong.



4. Laughing

Having a good laugh - or even reminiscing with others about a time we laughed - takes us to the end of a stress cycle. Not fake, polite or socially imposed laughter, we're talking about belly laughs - deep, embarrassing and uncontrollable laughter.

Neuroscientist, Prof. **Sophie Scott**, shows its effect on our bodies and brains. *"When we laugh, we use an ancient evolutionary system that mammals have evolved to make and maintain social bonds and regulate emotions,"* says Sophie.

When we're taking the time to connect and laugh with someone, we're engaging in a process that rebalances the nervous system and puts the brakes on defensive stress responses like fight or flight.



5. Affection

A warm, safe and reassuring hug does as much to help our bodies feel they have escaped a threat as jogging a couple of kilometers – and it's a lot less sweaty.

Try hugging someone you trust while holding your own centre of gravity and not leaning into them. Do this until you feel relaxed. It's not about the time. What matters is that you feel the stress easing, or what therapist Suzanne Lasenza describes as "hugging until relaxed." The research suggests this kind of hug can positively alter your hormones, lower your blood pressure and heart rate, and improve your mood.

Of course, affection doesn't stop with other human beings. Hugging or petting a cat or dog for a few minutes completes the cycle too.



6. Crying

Have you ever noticed that you feel “lighter” after a good cry? You may not have changed the situation, but you completed the cycle. People often suppress tears because they’ve been told it’s a sign of weakness or incompetence. The science suggests that by doing this, we are missing out on a range of benefits.

When we cry in response to stress, our tears flush toxins out of our system. It also releases “feel good” chemicals such as oxytocin and endorphins that help with pain relief and pleasure.

If crying doesn’t come naturally, you may have to learn how to cry. Triggers such as an emotive memory, song, movie or book can be useful in inducing a good, therapeutic cry.



7. Creative Expression

In the words of Carrie Fisher, “take your broken heart, make it into art.” To reduce stress, try creating something from inside yourself and express it. This can be whatever you want it to be: home improvements, gardening, painting, writing, singing, baking or anything that involves the act of creation. The process is the goal, not the product.

Like sport, art - including storytelling in all forms - creates a context that tolerates and even encourages big emotions. Art of all kinds gives us the chance to celebrate, explore and move through our emotions in a safe space.



8. Sleep

Sleep is one of the most powerful ways to complete the stress cycle. Without it, there are numerous severe cognitive, physical, social and emotional consequences, including burnout.

Our director, **Melanie Kiley**, asked Dr. Tara Swart (author of *The Neuroscience of Leadership*) to share her number #1 tip for leaders to break the stress cycle. Her answer was SLEEP. Sleep is your superpower, so prioritise good quality sleep of between 7-9 hours.

Improving our sleep can be hard. It involves breaking a long history of bad habits and training ourselves to prioritise sleep. There are a few ways to begin working towards this, but it's important to remember progression over perfection. This means that it's important to remember that we won't always get it right, and that's okay. As long as we're working towards good sleep habits, that's all that truly matters.

Some tips for getting started are:

- Going to bed and waking up at the same time
- Avoid taking stimulants, like caffeine or soda, 4 to 6 hours before bed
- Turn off digital devices so the blue light or vibrations from notifications don't interrupt your sleep
- Exercise earlier in the day
- Clear your bedroom of anything work-related
- Sleep in a cold, dark room
- Develop and practice a bedtime routine to wind down and clear your mind. This can include a bath, a book or some tea – anything that helps you to relax.





9. Mindfulness

Being mindful means doing nothing else but staying still, listening to our breath and allowing our thoughts to flow freely. Practising mindfulness reduces activity in the part of our brain called the amygdala, which is so effective at switching on our stress response that your background level of stress is reduced. This means you are better able to focus and your mental clarity increases.

Mindfulness can also be applied when we are 'doing' something. Like walking mindfully, washing hands or brushing teeth. It is about being present in the activity and not in our thoughts. Reflection and journaling are also powerful tools to practice mindfulness. We have a great resource, [Journaling To Ignite Best Thinking](#), to help get you started.

Although the practice of meditation is associated with a sense of peacefulness and physical relaxation, practitioners have long claimed that meditation also provides cognitive and psychological benefits that persist throughout the day.



10. Gratitude

Neuroscience shows how the daily practice of gratitude affects healthy brain activity and physical and psychosocial wellbeing. Researchers at the National Institutes of Health found gratitude increases activity in the hypothalamus, a region that links the nervous system to the endocrine system and controls important body functions like hunger, thirst, sleep, metabolic activity and stress management. In addition, feelings of gratitude directly activate the limbic system and trigger a release of dopamine - a reward chemical.

Our brain also produces oxytocin when expressing gratitude. Often called the "cuddle drug", it's a neurotransmitter known for its effects on prosocial behaviors like trust, empathy and affection. But here's the key: the body's natural baseline for oxytocin is almost zero. In other words, we don't automatically produce it so our body needs a stimulus.

Here, it is important to know that our brain has a natural tendency to look for things that prove what it believes to be true. For example, if we get up in the morning and believe that we're going to have a miserable day, our brain will search for evidence to prove us right. Likewise, if we start our day with the belief that life is good, our brain will search for evidence to confirm that worldview.

The outlook you choose determines whether you'll get stuck in the virtuous cycle or the vicious cycle, and research shows that including a gratitude journal in your daily routine is one of the most effective ways to stay in a virtuous cycle.

If you've forgotten the language of gratitude, you'll never be on speaking terms with happiness.

How do you know that you have completed the stress cycle?

... Listen to your body

"You can't control your stressors, but you can complete the stress cycle to get the stress chemical out of your body."

Here are two great incisive questions to help you get better at reading the signs and completing the stress cycle:

- If you knew that your body is currently talking to you, what would you hear it say?
- If you knew that it was up to you, how would you manage your stress to prevent burnout?

Our mindsets matter and so often, what we think, we become. We all have the answers to the questions we hold, all we need is time to think. So, in the wise words of Yoda...

Already know you, that which you need.

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