

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle



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With Your Host

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Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

Stress. We're all awash with it in this day and age. While our actual lives are rarely in danger, our bodies can feel like we're about to be killed and eaten, and they respond how they're supposed to be flooding our perfect little bodies with gallons of stress hormones in a process known as the stress activation response.

If we don't complete this cycle and signal to our bodies that we're safe and all is well, we can stay stuck in that lousy feeling sympathetic nervous system, our fight or flight, unable to calm ourselves or to find the relief we need to deal with the next jerk at work, the next call from our parents, the next fight with our loved one, the next stressful commute.

In this episode, I'll be nerding out hard about how our bodies respond to stress and I'll be sharing some simple and vital ways to calm ourselves on the daily to close the loop on our national chronic stress situation.

You're listening to Feminist Wellness, the only podcast that combines functional medicine, life coaching, and feminism to teach smart women how to reclaim their power and restore their health! Here's your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, Herbalist and Life Coach, Victoria Albina.

Hello, hello my love. How are you today? I hope you are doing so well. I am doing really well. I just spent the most gorgeous week in the Sandia Mountains of New Mexico, which is near Albuquerque, on the way between Albuquerque and New Mexico. I love that part of the world. I was so privileged and lucky to go there last year to volunteer on the Navajo Reservation at Shiprock and I love it.

I love the desert. I mean, I'm a water baby for sure. I'm from a beach town, Mar del Plata. I live to be in the water, in the ocean, but there is just something so special about the desert. It really calls me in a deep way. And last week I was doing this breath work teacher training with the most

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

amazing human, this gentleman called David Elliot, and I was in this room with 44 other amazing souls. Folks who feel like true family to me now, family forever.

And it was incredible to just completely put my phone away, put the computer away, not be connected to the world outside this little energetic bubble we connected and to feel how my chronic pain relaxed, how my digestion shifted, how everything in my body just went aah, and it got me thinking about stress.

Like so many of you, I've spent so much of my life talking on and on about I'm so stressed out, and I hear the folks I work with talking about their stress all day long. It makes sense if you think about it. I mean, more is being asked of us than ever before between family, work obligations, the constant ping of email, text, social media.

Even creating time and space for the things we want to do can feel really stressful, like making it to the gym or eating well. Our brains and bodies can turn just about anything into a stressor. So today my love, we will be looking at the concept of stress and stressors, and the effects of both on our bodies.

We'll tap into some feminist musings, and I will nerd out as I am one to do about the science behind our stress. I will also share some really simple, free, totally accessible ways that you can tap into your own beautiful ability to complete the stress cycle, and I'll share about my new offering that I'm so excited about.

So let's talk about why stress sucks. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the CDC, and the National Institute on Occupational Safety and Health, the workplace is the number one most reported cause of perceived stress. The CDC reports that 110 million people die every year as a direct result of stress. That number blew my mind.

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

The math is that that's seven people every two seconds. The American Psychological Association reports that chronic stress is linked to six of the leading causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, pulmonary or lung issues, fatal accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide. Y'all, that's really bad, and it's also so preventable that it's heartbreaking.

So let's start by defining terms. A stressor is a thing that happens in your life that you could respond to with stress. Things that turn on our body's stress response chemicals, things that we interpret as potentially causing us harm. Stressors can be internal, such as that inner mean girl who tells you you aren't good enough, your own judgments about your worth or value, your looks or your size, and any future-tripping you may be spinning in.

External stressors can be things like family, work, cash flow, health concerns, the patriarchy, hetero normativity, racism, structural poverty, et cetera, et cetera. Stress is our internal response to a stressor, a perceived threat. This response is both physiological and mediated by our nervous system. Our sympathetic nervous system to get specific, which goes into high alert and triggers the fight, flight, freeze response. A process which is mediated by our vagus nerve and can turn our world upside down in a split second.

As we discussed, you and I in episode seven, all about your adrenal glands and fatigue, your body releases adrenaline, also known by the sciency-er name of epinephrine, which shunts blood to your muscles, just in case you need to run when you're faced with a stressor. You're flooded with endorphins, those feel-good chemicals that are released by both fear and exercise, which help distract you from the discomfort of the rest of the stress process, lest you focus on that discomfort versus survival.

Your glycogen is activated and your body gets flooded with glucose, blood sugar, and glucocorticoids. They start to pump through your veins to fuel your harrowing escape. With all these vital chemicals in your bloodstream

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

that your body has spent a lot of reserve energy to make, your body starts to increase your heart rate and blood pressure, and your heart start to beat harder, faster, and feel louder in your chest to get the chemicals you need all around your body along with the extra oxygen you'll need for your escape, which you get as your breath rate increases.

You're hyper alert, focused, vigilant, ready to pounce. Muscles tense and tighten so they can spring into action. Your cognition slows, and your memory recall is reduced. Your brain and body want you to think about this attack only. It does a great job with that. While your body is so beautifully focused on your simple survival, unnecessary functions like you know, digestion, reproduction, ovulation, making new hair, skin, and nails, having an immune system, all of these things slow way down.

Why would your smart body focus on anything other than escaping the beast before you? So let's put it in to context. There you are, on the great planes, some thousands of years ago. A lion is staring you down and you're all alone. You're awash in intense response chemicals and you're super-duper activated.

So he's coming at you and quick. You have three choices. Fight, anger, flight, fear, or freeze, play dead and cross your fingers. You know you're just a small little animal, just a human and no match for that wild and beautiful beast with tooth and claw. So you take your chances and you run.

Your body mobilizes everything it's got to make those little legs of yours move like lightning, and you run and you run and you look over your shoulder and the lion's still coming and you run and you run, and you manage to hide behind a boulder, pull out a weapon, and just as that lion's crossing your path, bam. You smack him on the head and the lion is no more.

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

You have bested the king of the jungle. You race home victorious, and then entire village celebrates your victory and success and they help you to get the lion and drag him home for many a dinner to come. This scenario is an example of our focus today. A completed stress response. You got activated, you move through that activation. Felt it in your body, and you had a natural release of that stress response.

You got celebrated by your community. You got hugs and high-fives. Kisses, and you heard, "Good girl, you've done well." And your body is able to calm itself. It sends a signal that all is well here. The threat is over and gone, and you can relax. Phew, you made it. Your hormones and neurochemicals are free to stabilize, and you can enjoy the celebration with your family. You were victorious, little one. Well done.

In another scenario, you're back on the planes and that lion is chasing you and you're running full speed when the lion all of a sudden gets a call on his cellphone and he stops to answer it and therefore he's not chasing you. He lifts the phone to his head, which is not a great idea because radiation. I kind of wish the lion had headphones.

But anyway, he starts to argue with his boyfriend about who's bringing home dinner. He's all, "Brian, I'm chasing a human right now. I told you I'd bring home dinner for you and the cubs," and his boyfriend goes, "I just brought down a giraffe. I mean dude, I left you a Post-It about it in the cave this morning. I really need you to focus more."

So that lion that was chasing you, let's call him Mike - that's a good name for a lion - turns around and walks away. You're saved, but without a completion to the stress response, you walk away all jittery, all jacked up on your own stress hormones. You're not sure if he's going to change his mind and chase you down maybe for breakfast or something, or if you're really safe or what the F is going on around here? Who gave that lion a cellphone?

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

Your body hasn't gotten the signal that you're truly safe, that the stressor is gone and the stress response cycle is over. Eliminating the stressor doesn't do that for you. It doesn't make the stress go away until it's gone from our bodies. So let's say you walk back to your village and you recount the story of Mike the lion and your harrowing escape, and your family is so excited and hugs you and celebrates you in chants and prayer about your good fortune. High-fives abound.

Then your body gets the signal. The stress cycle is complete and you are now flooded with feel-good hormones, and the panic chemicals turn off in response. You feel seen, heard, held, loved, and your body can calm itself, can shut those little stress chemicals off and can turn your digestion, immune system, hair-making factory, a.k.a mitosis back on and can get back to the business of being a human, lion-attack free.

The problem in our kooky modern lives is that our sweet little primitive lizard brains, the oldest and least of all of our thinking parts - not casting stones, that's just science - can get really confused and can think that a family member that irritates you, a schmuck at work, an ex you see on the regular at the co-op or whatever, the fact of taxes, or Instagram or dating, or whatever it is that you perceive as stressful is actually a stressor.

But the problem is you can't exactly jump across the conference room table and wrestle that schmuck at work to the ground, kill him and raise his head in the air victorious. I mean, HR would have a field day with you and the mess on the carpet, I mean, it's all too much.

So you sit there, quietly, politely stewing in your own adrenaline, cortisol, and all the rest of those stress hormones as he keeps saying word after word that annoys and annoys you and raises your stress response. Your body is activated. And if you and the dude keep having to sit across from each other at meetings, you're going to stay activated in that stress response until you do something about it.

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

And doing something about it is so vital for our mental, physical, and spiritual health. And as I said before, stress can literally kill you and it's the death of 1000 lousy little cuts, wearing down your cardiovascular system, your adrenals, your everything. Causing chronic pain and discomfort, leaving you depressed and anxious. And it makes your hair look terrible, and I'm a Leo so I worry about such things.

Unless you take active steps to complete the stress response cycle, your body will stay stuck in freak out mode until you're too worn out to even begin to take fight or flight, and your body puts you in the time out corner in freeze and fatigue. So with this very nerdy understanding of what stress and stressors are, why they're so bad for our health and how vital it is to complete the stress activation or stress response cycle, it's important to talk about how and why we get stuck in chronic stress.

Why we may suppress, delay, or ignore our own stress response. Our body's cries to scream, hit, run, fight or flight a million times a day. I want to start by saying that sometimes, keeping quiet and not fighting back is the physically safer bet. So it's hot out in New York City, which means that sexual harassment season hath begun.

It is generally a safer plan for small me to wear big old headphones and sunglasses when I'm walking around in the summer and not to scream back at dudes saying gross things to me on the street. So I choose to delay my freak out, to keep my body safe and keep walking most of the time, though I do sometimes speak up. Whether that's safe or not is questionable, but that's my reality.

And every time I push those feelings down, boom, stress response cycle activated and release denied. As a human socialized as a woman, I was taught and society loves to remind me and most of us socialized as women that speaking up or speaking bad is uncouth, impolite, not something we

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

should do. Don't be inappropriate. Don't upset your father. Oh, you know how your cousin can be. Just let it go, that person didn't mean to upset you.

When your body just wants a physical action response, like we would have had on the great planes all those years ago. When you can't respond as you'd like, or you feel shame or guilt for doing so, and are internalizing those messages, you stay trapped in stress. And finally, and the reason why all the tips to follow are daily activities, daily stressors lead to daily stress.

If you aren't giving your body what it needs to complete the cycle, each day's wee stressors will add on to the previous days and the days before that until you collapse in a pile of your own unreleased stress. So I want to take a second to talk about the freeze part of the fight, flight, freeze sympathetic nervous system.

So freeze is fascinating to me. So the lion's on your tail, you run, you're all full of adrenaline, all of that, all frantic. The lion doesn't get a phone call and he catches you. You feel his fangs on your leg and you collapse to the ground. You realize that it's last resort time if you're smaller than a lion and really tired so you play dead.

While that might sound like a moment of rest, freeze is actually super exhausting to your body. It's like slamming on the brakes in the middle of racing your bike down a massive hill. You're bound to go flying over the handlebars, ass over teakettle. I love American expressions and I'm not very good at them. My parents didn't know them or say them growing up and they crack me up.

Quick side note, my mom always say we'll jump off that bridge when we get there, and I was literally like, 30 years old by the time someone corrected me that it was actually cross that bridge when we get there. So, you're all panicked, you're all freaking out, you're all in fight or flight, and then your

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

body goes - puts the brakes on, ass over teakettle. You go flying into parasympathetic nervous system. Rest and digest system.

It gets swapped out so quick for the part of you that's freaking out and you shut down. If you've ever been in an actually scary or dangerous situation and felt like you couldn't respond, like your body literally wouldn't let you scream or hit or do anything, that was because your perfect body had perceived the situation to be end of days dangerous and froze you right down. You didn't do anything wrong nor did your body.

It was trying to protect you the only way it knew how, though whatever experience you survived that led your body to freeze was likely challenging to say the least, I want to take a moment to thank your body for saving your life. Well done. Thank you. If this resonates for you, take a moment to thank your body too. That's a nice thing to do.

So now that we understand the science of the stress response cycle, fight, flight, and freeze, the question I'd be having if I were you was, that's all well and good, how do we complete the stress cycle? So let's say you're a gazelle now. I want you to pause, feel gazelle, embody it. And you did the whole running thing because you saw the lion and you're a gazelle so you don't really have the gear to fight, what with being a gazelle, so you ran.

Lion got your leg, you collapsed to the ground, playing dead. And the second Mike the lion - this is the guy with the cellphone - gets his phone call, gets his message that he needs to walk away and get his cubs, gazelle you stand up and out of instinct, shakes from nose to toes and tail. A massive full-body shake, which sends a signal throughout your gazelle body that you're fine. You're okay. You're no longer in danger.

The lion's walking home and you're safe. The cycle has been completed. I first learned about the power of a good full-body shake from my beloved friend, Ellen. We worked together in an environment that was often full of

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

stressors, and we would gravitate towards the safe space of each other's office any time we saw an open door.

One day, I was attempting to complete my stress cycle without knowing it, by telling her all about it when in her infinite wisdom, she said, "Girl, what you need to do is just stand up and shake your body." So we closed the door and did just that. Like literally, shook our arms, shook our legs, and you know what? I felt better afterwards. I felt my body relax.

The stressor and the stress both felt farther away, less present and I felt more cognitively capable of dealing with them from the place of my higher self. And so my love, this example of being that little gazelle, shaking your body, leads us to our first and most beautiful tip, which is the power of exercise to complete the stress cycle.

Dozens of studies show what the gazelle already knew, that when you're stressed, your body needs to move to get that energy out of you and to signal your body that all is now well. This is one of the many reasons why I exercise just about every day and encourage you to do the same. Exercise is your best defense against chronic stress because it releases the chemicals that tell you you're okay my love, there is no lion here.

And cardiovascular exercise, getting your heart rate up and rocking out is the best way. It doesn't matter if it's the elliptical, spin class, Zumba, whatever, movement is a magical cure for an overworked stress response. Physical activity is the most efficient way to complete this cycle. And if I can't make it to the gym, I make sure to put some tunes on and have like, a two to five-minute dance party with myself any chance I can.

If you have chronic pain or a condition where exercise triggers more symptoms, like chronic fatigue or fibromyalgia, you can use this following trick which I absolutely adore, which is to simulate exercise with sequential muscular contractions. Stay with me here.

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

In an earlier episode, I shared the power of a body scan meditation to help you relax and release tension in your body. And side note, you can get that meditation for free on my website and I'll put a link in the show notes. This technique is similar and why not? I'll make a guided version of it and I'll put that up on the website too because I love you that much.

So, you can start by either lying down, you can do this sitting up, or even standing up on the subway if you have to. The process is to tighten each muscle of your body, and I like to start with my toes. So tighten, tighten, tighten, and relax. And then tighten your calves, tighten, tighten, tighten, and relax. And work your way all the way up your body. This exercise, done daily can be incredibly helpful in reducing your stress and it can bring up a lot of feelings.

So stay with it, dedicate yourself to doing it for three minutes a day and see how different your body and stress response can feel. So let's go back to our first example where you bested the lion and arrived home victorious. Connecting with your community allowed your body to feel chemically safe, and that positive social interaction allowed for the completion of the cycle.

Community is a vital feminist principle that we are all stronger together, and leaning in on beloved community is amazing for your health. So too is consensual affection and asking for a huge or a high-five, or some other sign of connection can help wind your body down. If there's no one around to give you a hug, I recommend hugging yourself. Wrapping your arms around your torso and squeezing your own arms. Left hand, right hand, left hand, right hand.

Activating each side of your brain and sending the signal to your body that you're safe. Creativity also helps to ground us, and that can mean dancing, making art, writing, even playing sports. When we're connected to our creativity, we're grounded in our second chakra and can feel connected to ourselves and others. Grounded, safe.

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

Journaling about it also helps, and you know I'm obsessed with that. Remember that when we're dealing with stress, holding it in is where the danger lies. So get it out of your body in whatever safe way you can. And to be clear, buffering or spiritual bypassing is so tempting when we're stuck in the loop of a stress response.

Capitalism and our society has taught us that the cure for stress is a glass of wine, smokes, some shopping, some TV, but alas, those things just don't work to truly close the stress activation cycle in our bodies. They just prolong our suffering. When this episode is over, go on and listen to episode 14, Buffering, to hear more about this seemingly helpful habit and how it's keeping you in your stress and disconnected from your highest self.

So while buffering doesn't work, what does work to close the loop is reconnecting with your breath. Remember when I was nerding out and talked about how your body is desperate for oxygen when it thinks it needs to bolt from a lion? Cool, your body wants oxygen. Give it some oxygen, my love, and blow off some of that yucky feeling inducing carbon dioxide that gets stored in your body when you're breathing all uptight in the top of your chest as you try to run from a lion.

I talk a lot about the power of breathing to help us feel calm, centered, safe, and grounded. Slow, deep belly breathing helps to shift us out of sympathetic dominance into our parasympathetic nervous system, thus beginning to complete the stress response cycle. It can take more than just deep breathing in the case of a major stressor bodily freak out, but remembering to take some deep, slow breaths can get you through the first of it so you can shake off the worst of it later when it's safe to do so.

At the beginning of this episode, I was sharing with you my love, about my recent training as a breath work meditation teacher. Breath work has played an amazing role in my life and helps to not only reduce stress, but to

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

help me connect in with universal life flow energy, what some folks call god or goddess, the universe, great unicorn in the sky, what have you.

I was recently trained in a two-part pranayama-based breath work technique. What I learned from David Elliot. There are dozens of different techniques for breath work and I've studied several of them, and I want to be clear that I'm not out here saying that one is better than the other, but I do know which one tends to work best for me.

So the breath that David teaches that I love is a deeper transformational process, and can also be a little psychedelic. Like, you breath until you literally feel like you're both leaving your body in a way but also getting deeper into your body in a way, and you might be talking with your dead and you might be talking with the living that you've never been able to talk with.

I mean, it's a little hard to explain without experiencing it, but what I know for sure is that it's transformational because it's been transformation for me, and it's a way to connect in with that life flow energy that connects all of us. Every human mammal, every four-legged, the birds and the bees, the insects, the plants, the sunshine, the air, the wind, the fire. This energy that connects us all.

And when we are living in our truth, following our path, when we are true to ourselves and giving voice to our wants, our needs, our childhood wounds, we can show up with full heart for the flow of life's energy and we can use this breathing practice to help us heal age old wounds and to create space to more deeply support ourselves and each other.

And this breathing practice especially when engaged with daily, can help you complete the cycle, to close the loop, and to let your body know that you are safe, you are held, you are loved. There is no lion on your tail. There's nothing to fear. You are safe to relax and your body can return to

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

that beautiful parasympathetic state with full digestive capacity versus IBS symptoms. Full immune function, versus being the one that always catches every little bug or cold going around town. Full adrenal function instead of constant fatigue. Full cognition versus brain fog.

I'm so dedicated to the power of this work that I've created an online breath work experience that you can do from the comfort of your own home to help you shift and transform your relationship with yourself and the world. Head on over to my website, hop on my email list to be the first to learn about this simple transformational practice.

I'll put a link in the show notes on my website and Instagram. You can follow me there at [victoriaalbinawellness](#), so you can access this course, which is an introductory course to a breath work practice, which you can download and do at home on your own in your own time. You'll have it forever and ever to help you begin this transformational healing, and to know that you have a new tool in your toolbox that can help you to complete the stress cycle.

Coming to a place of true freedom from stress versus just doing what most of us have learned to do, which is to continue to hold stress in our bodies and to therefore feel like the victim of our stress versus the powerful being that I know you are. The being who can release that stress experience.

Alright my love, it has been such a pleasure as always to nerd out with you and to share these simple tips for completing your stress response. In a coming episode, I'll be talking about the language we use to talk about stress and how that can keep us stuck in these loops. For now, give yourself a hug, squeeze those muscles tight, and enjoy the release of tension.

Go out for a run, lift some weights, dance in your living room. Hug someone if that's available, or pet an animal. Lean on your beloved community in

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #17: Stress Response Cycle

person or online. Tell yourself just how much you love you and that you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And consider adding a daily exercise or breath work practice or both into your beautiful life. Your amazing human body will thank you.

Thanks for tuning in my love. I hope this information was helpful for you, and I'm so excited to be sharing this new breath work offering with you. It's been many, many, many years in the making and I'm so glad it's finally here. I'm sending you so much love and healing energy. Take good care of you and remember, when one of us heals, we help heal the world. I love you. Be well.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you like what you've heard, head to VictoriaAlbina.com to learn more.