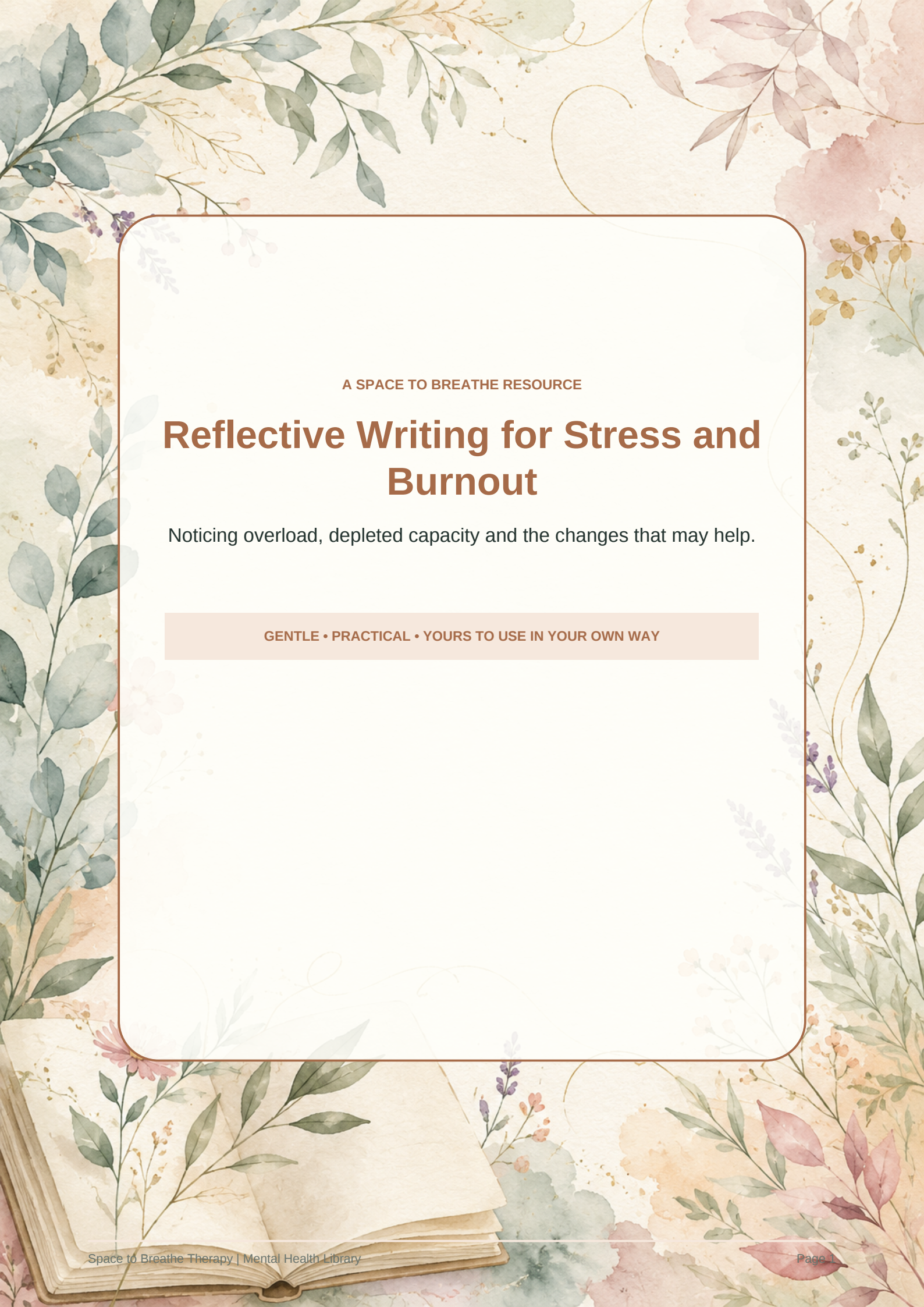




A SPACE TO BREATHE RESOURCE

Reflective Writing for Stress and Burnout

Noticing overload, depleted capacity and the changes that may help.

GENTLE • PRACTICAL • YOURS TO USE IN YOUR OWN WAY

When coping hides the cost

Burnout often develops while a person is still functioning. You may keep meeting responsibilities but feel increasingly detached, irritable, exhausted or unable to recover. Writing can reveal the cost of coping before the body forces a complete stop.

Stress is not only the number of tasks on a list. Uncertainty, emotional labour, sensory overload, poverty, discrimination, caring, chronic pain and the need to appear fine can all use substantial capacity. A fuller reflection includes invisible work. Ask what you are monitoring, anticipating or suppressing throughout the day, because these demands may explain why apparently “small” tasks feel impossible.

REFLECT

What am I managing on the outside that is costing me heavily on the inside?

Map demand and capacity

Create two lists: what is currently taking energy and what is restoring, protecting or conserving it. Include sensory demands, decision-making, masking, caring responsibilities, conflict, uncertainty and lack of recovery time - not only paid work.

A helpful energy map looks at before, during and after. Some activities seem manageable while you are doing them but create a delayed crash. Record the recovery cost as well as the performance. This is especially important with neurodivergence, chronic illness and fluctuating conditions. Capacity should be judged by whether an activity can be repeated safely, not only whether it was completed once.

- Which demand is essential?
- Which can be reduced, delayed or shared?
- Where am I using urgency when “good enough” would be safe?
- What recovery am I postponing until everything is finished?

Rest is not a reward for reaching breaking point. It is part of how a human system remains able to function.

Turn insight into protection

Choose one adjustment small enough to use: a protected break, fewer decisions, a clearer boundary, a sensory aid, asking for written information or reducing one non-essential commitment.

Early signs are personal. One person becomes tearful; another becomes unusually productive and unable to stop. You may sleep more, sleep less, lose appetite, seek stronger sensory input or become intolerant of ordinary noise. Write your own “yellow-light” signs and decide what response belongs at that stage. Waiting for a red-light crisis makes recovery longer and choices narrower.

REFLECT

What would make the next seven days 5% more manageable?

Remember

If exhaustion is persistent, severe or accompanied by physical symptoms, seek medical advice. Reflection can support awareness but should not replace assessment or practical support.

3. Recognising the early warning signs

Burnout rarely arrives without signals, although they may be easy to dismiss. Changes can appear emotionally, physically, cognitively and socially. You may become more sensitive to noise, make more mistakes, withdraw, lose patience, struggle to begin tasks or find that rest no longer feels restorative.

Boundaries can bring guilt, especially if you are used to being dependable. Reflect on the belief beneath the guilt: “If I rest, I am letting people down” or “My needs only count when I am ill.” Then examine the cost of that rule. A sustainable boundary protects your ability to remain present over time; it is not evidence that you care less.

- Physical: headaches, tension, disturbed sleep, appetite changes or frequent illness.
- Cognitive: forgetfulness, indecision, reduced concentration or blankness.
- Emotional: numbness, dread, irritability, hopelessness or feeling trapped.
- Behavioural: cancelling, overworking, avoiding, scrolling or relying more on substances.

REFLECT

Which early sign appears before I reach complete exhaustion?

4. The role of boundaries and recovery

A boundary is not only saying no. It may be a limit on availability, a request for written instructions, a protected lunch break, fewer transitions or a decision not to explain yourself repeatedly. Effective boundaries match the source of the demand.

A recovery plan should remove demand as well as add soothing activities. A bath, walk or meditation cannot compensate for an unchanged level of overload. Consider workload, deadlines, role clarity, financial support, workplace adjustments, childcare, domestic tasks and medical assessment. Practical changes may be more therapeutic than asking yourself to tolerate an intolerable situation more calmly.

Recovery also needs variety. Sleep matters, but so can low-demand pleasure, sensory regulation, movement, time without performance, practical help and connection where you do not have to mask.

REFLECT	Which boundary would protect energy before I am already depleted?
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5. A realistic recovery plan

- Stabilise basics: food, hydration, medication, sleep and medical support.
- Reduce what can be reduced; do not build recovery on top of the same workload.
- Tell one safe person what is happening.
- Ask for adjustments at work, education or home.
- Reintroduce activities slowly and track their after-effects, not only whether you completed them.

Track recovery by function and felt capacity, not productivity alone. Useful signs may include waking with less dread, finding words more easily, tolerating ordinary decisions, reconnecting with interest or recovering sooner after activity. Improvement can be uneven. If returning to activity repeatedly causes a major setback, slow down and seek appropriate professional guidance.

Recovery is rarely linear. A more active day may require more rest afterwards. This is information, not failure.

Seek further help

Speak with your GP or another qualified professional if exhaustion is persistent, severe, worsening or affecting your ability to function.