

Recognising When You Are Not Coping

Listening to the signs before you reach empty

Most people do not wake up one morning suddenly unable to cope. More often, capacity is gradually used up. Sleep becomes lighter, patience shorter, concentration harder, the body tenser and ordinary tasks begin to require more effort. Because the changes can happen slowly, we may adapt to each one and keep telling ourselves we are fine.

Not coping is not a character flaw. It can be a sign that the demands placed on you have become greater than the resources, rest, support or emotional space available to you. Recognising that imbalance earlier gives you more choices.

You do not need to reach empty before you are allowed to slow down.

The signs often begin quietly

Early signs can be easy to dismiss because each one may seem small. You may tell yourself that everybody is tired, that you just need to get through the week, or that other people have more serious problems. But a pattern matters more than any single sign.

- You wake tired even after sleeping.
- Small decisions feel disproportionately difficult.
- You become more irritable, tearful or emotionally flat.
- Messages and calls feel like demands rather than connection.
- You stop doing things that normally help you feel like yourself.
- Your concentration drops and you make more mistakes.
- You feel physically tense, restless, headachy or generally 'on edge'.
- You avoid tasks because you cannot work out where to begin.
- You are eating, sleeping or using screens differently in an attempt to cope.
- You keep saying 'I'm fine' while privately wondering how long you can continue.

When coping becomes performing

Sometimes the strongest warning sign is the amount of effort required to look okay. You may still be meeting deadlines, caring for family, attending appointments and supporting everyone else. That can make it difficult for you - and for other people - to recognise that your internal resources are running low.

Functioning is not the same as thriving. Completing a task does not tell anyone how much it cost. If you regularly collapse after work, need entire weekends to recover, feel unable to tolerate ordinary conversation or have no energy left for basic self-care, it is worth paying attention.

A personal reflection

"I used to think not coping would look dramatic. I imagined I would know when I had reached my limit. In reality, it looked like answering everyone with 'fine', forgetting simple things, avoiding messages, feeling irritated by noise and needing longer and longer to recover. I kept waiting for permission to stop. Eventually I realised the signs themselves were permission. I did not have to completely fall apart before I deserved support." - illustrative personal reflection

Your body may be keeping the score

Stress and emotional overload can show up physically. You may notice muscle tension, headaches, stomach changes, a racing or noticeable heartbeat, tiredness, poor sleep, dizziness or feeling constantly alert. Physical

symptoms should not automatically be assumed to be stress, especially when they are new, severe or persistent, but they can be part of the picture.

My early body signals

Sleep: _____

Tension/pain: _____

Energy: _____

Appetite/digestion: _____

Emotional and cognitive signs

When we are depleted, emotional regulation often becomes harder. You may cry more easily, feel unusually angry, become numb, lose interest in things, feel hopeless about manageable problems, or become highly sensitive to criticism and rejection.

- Reading the same sentence repeatedly.
- Walking into a room and forgetting why.
- Difficulty prioritising or sequencing tasks.
- Feeling paralysed by choices.
- Making uncharacteristic mistakes.
- Catastrophising small setbacks.
- Struggling to find words or explain what you need.
- Feeling as though your brain is full or 'offline'.

Behaviour changes are information too

Look at what you are doing differently, not only what you are feeling. Behaviour can reveal depletion: cancelling repeatedly, isolating, procrastinating, working longer because concentration is poorer, neglecting meals, scrolling late into the night or becoming unable to rest without guilt.

Pause and notice

What am I doing more of lately? _____

What am I doing less of? _____

What have I stopped enjoying? _____

What am I avoiding because I feel depleted? _____

The empty-battery check

Imagine your capacity as a battery rather than a moral quality. Some activities use energy; others restore it. Difficulties arise when output continues for long periods without enough meaningful recovery.

Recovery is not always the same as stopping. Scrolling for two hours may distract you without restoring you. A day off filled with chores may still be demanding. Ask what genuinely leaves you with more capacity afterwards: sleep, quiet, nature, movement, safe company, creativity, predictable routines, nourishment, therapy, reduced sensory input or practical help.

What drains me fastest? _____

What restores me reliably? _____

What looks like rest but does not restore me? _____

Act at amber, not only at red

Many people wait until crisis point before changing anything. A more protective approach is to recognise an amber zone: the period when you are still functioning but the warning signs are accumulating.

- Cancel or postpone one non-essential demand.
- Tell one trusted person that your capacity is low.
- Protect food, hydration, sleep and prescribed medication routines.
- Break large tasks into the next visible step.
- Reduce unnecessary notifications, noise or social obligations.
- Ask for clarification rather than carrying uncertainty alone.
- Use appropriate leave or workplace support rather than treating collapse as the only valid reason to stop.
- Arrange professional support if symptoms are persisting or worsening.

A sentence you can use

"I am still functioning, but I can feel that I am running low. I need to reduce some pressure now rather than waiting until I cannot manage at all."

What support could look like

Support does not always mean therapy, although therapy can be valuable. It might mean asking a partner to take over one practical task, telling a manager that workload needs reviewing, speaking with your GP, accepting help with childcare, arranging quieter time, asking someone to sit with you while you complete an overwhelming task, or simply being honest with a friend.

People sometimes reject help because the support offered is not the support they need. Make the request specific: 'Can you make dinner tonight?' 'Can we move this deadline?' 'Could you listen for ten minutes without trying to fix it?' 'Can you come with me to the appointment?'

When rest alone is not enough

If you have been depleted for a long time, a weekend of rest may not resolve everything. There may be ongoing causes that need attention: unsustainable workload, caring responsibilities, relationship stress, financial pressure, grief, anxiety, depression, trauma, chronic stress, physical illness, sleep problems, neurodivergent overload or lack of practical support.

Ask two questions together: **How can I recover?** and **What needs to change so that I am not repeatedly emptied?**

My pressure map

The biggest pressure at the moment: _____

Something I can reduce: _____

Something I need help with: _____

A boundary I may need: _____

One conversation I need to have: _____

For people who find it difficult to stop

Rest can feel uncomfortable if your identity is tied to being useful, productive or dependable. You may experience guilt as soon as you stop. That guilt does not necessarily mean resting is wrong; it may simply mean rest is unfamiliar.

Try changing the question from 'Have I done enough to deserve rest?' to 'What does my body and mind need in order to keep functioning safely?' Rest is part of capacity management, not a reward for reaching exhaustion.

Supporting someone who is not coping

- Notice changes without accusing: 'You seem exhausted lately; how are things really?'
- Listen for what is underneath irritability, withdrawal or forgetfulness.
- Offer specific practical help rather than 'let me know if you need anything'.
- Do not make them prove they are struggling enough to deserve support.
- Encourage professional help if functioning, safety or wellbeing is deteriorating.
- Keep your own boundaries and wellbeing in view too.

When to seek professional or urgent help

Speak with a GP or qualified mental health professional if low mood, anxiety, stress, exhaustion or changes in functioning are persistent, worsening or affecting daily life. New or concerning physical symptoms should also be medically assessed rather than automatically attributed to stress.

If you feel unable to keep yourself safe, are thinking about suicide or self-harm, or there is an immediate risk to you or somebody else, seek urgent help. In a life-threatening emergency call 999 or go to A&E.; In England, NHS 111 can direct you to urgent mental health support. Samaritans provides emotional support on 116 123.

A seven-day 'listen earlier' reset

- Day 1 - Notice: write down three signs that your capacity is low.
- Day 2 - Reduce: remove or postpone one non-essential demand.
- Day 3 - Restore: spend time on something that genuinely replenishes you.
- Day 4 - Connect: tell one safe person how you are actually doing.
- Day 5 - Simplify: make one repeated task easier or more predictable.
- Day 6 - Boundary: say no, ask for more time or request help with one demand.
- Day 7 - Review: what changed when you listened to the signs earlier?

Books and resources

- *Burnout* - Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski.
- *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?* - Dr Julie Smith.
- *The Stress Solution* - Dr Rangan Chatterjee.
- *Overcoming Stress* - Lee Brosan and Gillian Todd.

Clinical/source notes

This guide is informed by public-facing NHS guidance on stress, anxiety, low mood and urgent mental health support, NHS Every Mind Matters information on stress and self-care, and Mind information on stress and mental health. The personal reflection is illustrative therapeutic writing and is not presented as the account of an identifiable individual.

The phrase 'not coping' is not a diagnosis. Similar experiences can occur for many reasons, including physical health conditions, medication effects, sleep problems and mental health difficulties. Persistent or concerning changes deserve appropriate professional assessment.

Space to Breathe Therapy

You do not have to use every last piece of yourself before you take your needs seriously. The earlier you listen, the more opportunity you have to protect your wellbeing, ask for support and make changes before you reach empty.