

The Self-Care Orbital Model

Everything in Life Is Connected

Wellbeing rarely sits in separate boxes. Sleep affects concentration. Work affects energy. Relationships can influence mood. Financial pressure can disturb sleep. Sensory overload can reduce social capacity. Poor physical health can change motivation. A lack of rest can make an ordinary disagreement feel enormous.

The Self-Care Orbital Model is a way of seeing those connections. Instead of asking, 'What is wrong with me?', it asks: **What is happening around me, what is happening within me, and how are these areas influencing one another?**

The model is not a diagnostic tool. It is a reflective framework for looking at the whole person and identifying where one realistic change might create a helpful ripple elsewhere.

You are at the centre - not because everything is your responsibility, but because your wellbeing deserves to be considered within the whole system of your life.

Why an orbital model?

An orbit is moving and connected. The different areas of life do not stay fixed. At one stage, work may require most of your energy. At another, health, caring responsibilities, grief or relationships may move closer to the centre of attention.

The goal is not perfect balance. Perfect balance is rarely realistic. The aim is awareness: noticing which areas are pulling strongly, which are being neglected, and where support could reduce strain.

Orbit 1 - Mental wellbeing

Mental wellbeing includes your thinking patterns, concentration, worry, self-talk, beliefs, cognitive load and ability to make decisions. When mental capacity is stretched, simple choices can become difficult and the mind may become more threat-focused.

Ask: What is occupying the most mental space? Am I carrying unfinished decisions? Am I repeatedly rehearsing or worrying? What could be written down, clarified, shared or postponed?

Orbit 2 - Emotional balance

Emotional wellbeing is not constant calm. It is the ability to notice feelings, understand what they may be communicating and have ways to express or regulate them safely. Stress can reduce the distance between a feeling and a reaction.

Emotions also interact with every other orbit. Hunger can affect irritability; sleep loss can lower emotional tolerance; conflict can affect appetite; loneliness can intensify low mood.

Orbit 3 - Physical health

Physical wellbeing includes sleep, pain, illness, medication, hormones, mobility, energy and access to healthcare. Physical symptoms can affect emotional wellbeing, while prolonged stress may also be experienced physically.

New, severe or persistent physical symptoms should be assessed appropriately rather than automatically attributed to stress. Whole-person thinking means taking both physical and psychological experiences seriously.

Connection check

One physical factor affecting my mood: _____
One emotional factor affecting my body: _____
One practical change that might support both: _____

Orbit 4 - Nutrition and hydration

Food and hydration support basic functioning, but people's needs and access differ. Sensory differences, eating disorders, allergies, intolerances, disability, medication, finances and executive-function difficulties may all influence eating.

The orbital question is not 'Am I eating perfectly?' It is 'How is my current nourishment affecting my energy, concentration, mood and physical wellbeing - and what support would make eating or drinking more manageable?'

Orbit 5 - Rest and recovery

Recovery is where the system has an opportunity to replenish. Sleep matters, but recovery also includes low-demand time, sensory rest, pauses between responsibilities, enjoyable activity and periods when you are not monitoring or performing.

When recovery is repeatedly sacrificed, other orbits may begin compensating. You may use more caffeine, become less patient, withdraw socially, lose motivation to move or find work increasingly difficult.

Orbit 6 - Relationships and connection

Relationships can be protective and restorative, but they can also become sources of stress. Connection is not simply how many people are around you. Consider whether you feel safe, respected, able to communicate needs and able to be yourself.

A relationship orbit can include partners, family, friends, colleagues, community and professional support. Different relationships can meet different needs.

Orbit 7 - Boundaries and self-respect

Boundaries help regulate how much demand enters the system. Without them, work can move into rest, other people's needs can repeatedly displace your own, and resentment can build.

Boundaries are not walls around every relationship. They are information about capacity, time, behaviour, privacy and needs. They may sound like: 'I cannot do that today'; 'I need notice'; 'I am not available after this time'; or 'I need us to speak respectfully if we continue this conversation.'

Orbit 8 - Work, study and purpose

Work and study can provide income, identity, structure, social contact, mastery and meaning. They can also bring pressure, deadlines, conflict, sensory demands, uncertainty or overload.

Purpose is broader than employment. Caring, creativity, volunteering, learning, spirituality, relationships and personal values can all contribute to meaning. Difficulties arise when one role becomes the only place from which worth is measured.

Orbit 9 - Finances and practical life

Money, housing, transport, paperwork, appointments, caring duties and household tasks may look separate from mental health, but practical pressure can have a significant emotional impact. Sometimes the most useful wellbeing intervention is practical rather than psychological.

Reducing administrative load, asking for benefits or workplace advice, sharing chores, automating a payment or arranging transport may create more emotional space than another relaxation exercise.

Orbit 10 - Environment and sensory needs

Your surroundings continuously interact with your nervous system. Noise, light, clutter, temperature, smells, crowds, interruptions and unpredictability may drain capacity. Other environments can feel regulating and safe.

Environmental adjustments are not indulgences. Headphones, softer lighting, predictable routines, comfortable clothing, quiet recovery space, reduced notifications or a more suitable workspace can change how much energy remains for other parts of life.

Orbit 11 - Personal growth and identity

Growth does not mean constantly improving yourself. It can mean understanding yourself more accurately, learning what matters to you, developing skills, changing an old pattern or becoming more accepting of needs you once judged.

Identity can also be affected by illness, parenthood, ageing, work changes, neurodivergence, loss, relationships and life transitions. Give yourself room to ask not only 'What should I be doing?' but 'Who am I becoming, and what feels authentic now?'

The ripple effect

One of the most useful features of the orbital model is the ripple effect. You do not always need to work directly on the area causing the most distress. Sometimes strengthening a connected orbit creates enough capacity for the difficult area to become more manageable.

- Better sleep may improve concentration and emotional tolerance.
- Reducing one work demand may create energy for relationships.
- Practical help with meals may support energy and mood.
- A boundary may create time for recovery.
- A quieter environment may reduce irritability and exhaustion.
- Social connection may make a difficult health period feel less isolating.
- Financial advice may reduce worry that relaxation techniques alone cannot resolve.

When one orbit dominates

At times, one area moves so close to the centre that it seems to become your whole life. Work can consume every conversation. Health anxiety can make every sensation feel urgent. Caring responsibilities can leave no room for identity outside caring. A relationship difficulty can occupy every quiet moment.

The aim is not to pretend the dominant problem is unimportant. It is to gently bring other parts of you back into view. Even during a difficult period, you remain more than the problem currently demanding your attention.

What is closest to my centre right now?

The orbit taking most of my energy: _____

What has been pushed furthest away? _____

One neglected area I would like to reconnect with: _____

A personal reflection

"There was a time when I kept trying to fix each problem separately. I treated poor sleep as a sleep problem, irritability as an emotional problem and lack of motivation as something I needed to push through. When I looked at everything together, the picture changed. I was overloaded, not recovering, saying yes too often and carrying practical worries alone. I did not need ten separate solutions. I needed to change the pattern connecting them." - illustrative personal reflection

Your orbital map

Give each area a simple rating from 0 to 5, where 0 means 'this needs significant attention' and 5 means 'this currently supports me well'. This is a reflection, not a clinical score.

My orbit ratings

Mental wellbeing ____ Emotional balance ____ Physical health ____
Nutrition & hydration ____ Rest & recovery ____ Relationships ____
Boundaries & self-respect ____ Work/study/purpose ____
Finances & practical life ____ Environment/sensory needs ____
Personal growth & identity ____

Now look for connections rather than simply choosing the lowest number. Which two or three areas seem to influence each other most strongly?

Finding the leverage point

A leverage point is a small change that may benefit more than one orbit. If poor sleep is linked to working late, the leverage point may be a work boundary. If meals are missed because of executive overload, the leverage point may be simplifying food preparation. If loneliness is worsening low mood, the leverage point may be one predictable connection each week.

My leverage point

The pattern I can see: _____

The smallest useful change: _____

Which other areas might improve if I do this? _____

Who or what could support the change? _____

When everything feels connected in the wrong direction

Sometimes the orbital model reveals a difficult loop: poor sleep reduces concentration; reduced concentration makes work take longer; longer work reduces rest; reduced rest increases irritability; irritability affects relationships; relationship stress then makes sleep harder.

Do not try to break every link at once. Choose the link that is most changeable. Perhaps work has a firm deadline but you can protect food. Perhaps caring responsibilities cannot reduce but you can accept practical help. Perhaps symptoms cannot immediately change but the environment around them can.

The model is intended to increase choice, not blame. Many pressures are structural, financial, medical or outside individual control. Self-care cannot fix unsafe employment, poverty, discrimination, inadequate healthcare or impossible caring demands. In those situations, advocacy and practical support may be essential parts of care.

A 7-day orbital experiment

- Day 1 - Map: rate each orbit without judging the scores.
- Day 2 - Connect: draw or write down three links you notice.
- Day 3 - Choose: identify one small leverage point.
- Day 4 - Support: ask what person, adjustment or resource would make it easier.
- Day 5 - Act: make the smallest version of the change.
- Day 6 - Observe: notice any ripple, even if it is small.
- Day 7 - Review: keep, adapt or replace the experiment.

Supporting someone using the orbital approach

If somebody is struggling, avoid assuming the problem sits only inside them. Ask about the wider system: sleep, work, relationships, physical health, sensory load, money, practical responsibilities and support.

You might ask: 'Which part of life is taking most from you right now?' 'What is making everything else harder?' or 'If one practical thing became easier this week, what would help most?'

When professional support belongs in the orbit

Professional help is not outside self-care; it can be part of the system that holds you up. Persistent low mood, severe anxiety, trauma symptoms, significant eating or sleep difficulties, substance misuse, inability to manage everyday life or concerning physical symptoms deserve appropriate assessment.

If you cannot keep yourself safe or there is an immediate life-threatening emergency, call 999 or go to A&E.; In England, NHS 111 can direct people to urgent mental health support. Samaritans offers emotional support on 116 123.

Books and further exploration

- *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?* - Dr Julie Smith: practical psychological tools for everyday emotional difficulties.
- *Burnout* - Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski: stress, recovery and the wider context around exhaustion.
- *The Compassionate Mind* - Paul Gilbert: understanding self-criticism and developing compassionate responses.
- *Atomic Habits* - James Clear: useful ideas about systems, environments and small behavioural changes; use selectively rather than as a mental-health treatment manual.

Clinical and source notes

This resource draws on whole-person wellbeing principles reflected in NHS public guidance on mental wellbeing, sleep, physical activity, nutrition, stress and accessing mental health support, together with NHS Every Mind Matters and Mind wellbeing information. The Self-Care Orbital Model presented here is a reflective educational framework created for this resource; it is not a validated diagnostic or clinical assessment tool.

People's circumstances differ. Medical conditions, disability, neurodivergence, eating disorders, medication, pregnancy, finances, culture, trauma and caring responsibilities can all change what is realistic or appropriate. Individual professional advice should be sought when needed.

Everything in life is connected

You are not a collection of separate problems. You are a whole person living inside a network of relationships, responsibilities, environments, physical needs, emotions, thoughts and experiences.

When one part changes, another may shift. That is why small changes can matter. You may not be able to change the whole system today, but you may be able to strengthen one connection, loosen one pressure or bring one neglected part of yourself back into the picture.

Look for the ripple, not perfection. One small change in the right place can create breathing space across more than one part of your life.

Space to Breathe Therapy - Helping you understand the whole picture, one connection at a time.