

# The Swiss Cheese Model of Self-Care

## When Life Feels Like Too Much - Strengthening Your Support Layers

There are times when life feels as though too many things are arriving at once. Sleep is poor, work is demanding, emotions are closer to the surface, practical tasks are piling up and the coping strategy that normally helps is not enough. It can feel as though one gap has opened after another.

The Swiss cheese model offers a useful way to think about this. In safety science, the model describes how several imperfect layers can work together: each layer has gaps, but harm is less likely when the gaps do not all line up. In this resource, that idea is adapted as a **self-care metaphor**. No single coping strategy has to be perfect. Different layers of support can overlap and strengthen one another.

*You do not need one perfect solution. You need enough supportive layers so that when one has a gap, something else can help hold you.*

### Important note about the model

The original Swiss cheese model was developed by psychologist James Reason to understand organisational accidents and defences. It was not created as a clinical model of self-care. Here it is deliberately used as an educational metaphor for layered wellbeing and support, not as a diagnostic or validated psychological assessment.

### Why one coping strategy is rarely enough

People sometimes place enormous pressure on one strategy: exercise must keep them well, a partner must always be available, therapy must solve everything, sleep must be perfect, or they must be able to calm themselves alone. Real life is less predictable. Every support has limitations, so strength often comes from having several different forms of support.

### Layer 1 - Self-awareness

Awareness is the ability to notice what is happening before you reach complete depletion. It includes recognising changes in sleep, appetite, irritability, concentration, motivation, physical tension, sensory tolerance and social capacity.

- What changes first when I am under pressure?
- What do other people sometimes notice before I do?
- Which signs mean I need to reduce demand rather than push harder?
- What tells me I am moving from stressed to overwhelmed?

### Layer 2 - Basic physical care

Sleep, hydration, suitable nourishment, medication, pain management, movement and healthcare form a practical layer underneath emotional wellbeing. These basics can be difficult when somebody is unwell, neurodivergent, depressed, in pain, financially stretched or living with an eating disorder. The goal is realistic access to basic care, not perfection.

### Layer 3 - Emotional regulation and coping tools

Coping tools help you move through distress without making the situation more harmful. Different tools suit different states. Breathing may help one person but irritate another; movement may regulate one day while quiet is needed the next.

- grounding through the senses
- paced breathing or a longer exhale
- writing or voice-noting thoughts
- movement, stretching or walking
- music, creativity or repetitive activity
- reducing stimulation and demands
- breaking a task into the smallest next step

### My coping layer

Tools that usually help me: \_\_\_\_\_

Tools that help only sometimes: \_\_\_\_\_

What I can try when my usual strategy is not enough: \_\_\_\_\_

## Layer 4 - Environment

Your surroundings can either reduce or add to the load. Noise, clutter, lighting, crowds, heat, smells, interruptions and unpredictability may create extra gaps in your support system. Consider headphones, softer lighting, a quieter room, fewer notifications, comfortable clothing, predictable routines or one lower-demand space.

## Layer 5 - Boundaries and reduced demand

Sometimes the strongest layer is not adding another wellness activity; it is removing something. Boundaries protect limited capacity. They can prevent work, caring, social demands or other people's urgency from consuming every available resource.

- What can wait?
- What can be delegated?
- What can be made smaller?
- What do I need to say no to?
- Where do I need clearer expectations or more notice?

## Layer 6 - Support network

Human support can include partners, family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, peer groups, community, faith groups or trusted online communities. One person does not need to meet every need. Think in roles: who can listen, help practically, understand your work, sit quietly with you, or help you reconnect with ordinary life?

### My support map

Someone I can talk to: \_\_\_\_\_

Someone who can help practically: \_\_\_\_\_

Someone who understands this part of my life: \_\_\_\_\_

Someone I could contact before things become a crisis: \_\_\_\_\_

## Layer 7 - Professional support

Professional support may include a GP, therapist, counsellor, psychiatrist, dietitian, occupational therapist, social worker, specialist nurse, workplace adviser, benefits adviser or another appropriate service. Seeking professional help is not evidence that personal coping has failed. It is another layer.

## Layer 8 - Meaning, hope and identity

When life becomes dominated by problems, identity can shrink around what is wrong. A protective layer can come from remembering the parts of you beyond the current difficulty: relationships, values, humour, creativity, interests, culture, nature, spirituality, learning or contribution. Hope can simply mean believing the present moment is not the whole story.

## Where are the holes right now?

A hole is not a personal failure. It is a place where a support layer is unavailable, depleted or not currently enough. Your sleep may be disrupted by pain. A friend may be away. Work may temporarily be intense. Your usual coping strategy may not work because the problem has changed.

### My current gaps

A layer that feels strong: \_\_\_\_\_

A layer with a current gap: \_\_\_\_\_

Another layer that could compensate: \_\_\_\_\_

One piece of support I need to add: \_\_\_\_\_

## When several holes line up

Overwhelm often appears when several protective layers weaken together. Poor sleep reduces emotional tolerance; reduced tolerance makes work harder; work takes longer; meals become irregular; social contact drops; and suddenly there is very little between you and the full force of the pressure.

This is why a difficult reaction can seem to arrive 'out of nowhere'. Often several small gaps gradually aligned.

## A personal reflection

*"I used to think coping meant finding the thing that worked and then doing it properly. When that thing stopped working, I felt as though I had failed. Looking at support in layers changed that. Some weeks my routine is strong but my sleep is not. Sometimes friends hold me while I have less capacity to hold myself. Sometimes I need professional help. The layers change, but I do not have to rely on only one." - illustrative personal reflection*

## Strengthening a weak layer

Do not try to strengthen every layer at once. Choose the layer where a small change is realistic. If sleep is being affected by late work, the change may be a boundary. If meals are missed because of executive overload, it may be simpler food or practical help. If isolation is increasing, it may be one predictable contact.

### One layer to strengthen

The layer: \_\_\_\_\_  
What is weakening it? \_\_\_\_\_  
The smallest useful change: \_\_\_\_\_  
Who or what could help? \_\_\_\_\_  
When will I review it? \_\_\_\_\_

## Your emergency layers

It can help to decide in advance what happens when ordinary coping is no longer enough. An emergency support plan might include people you will contact, where you can go, what helps reduce immediate risk, relevant medication information and how to access urgent professional help.

If you cannot keep yourself safe, are thinking about suicide or self-harm, 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 provides emotional support on 116 123.

## Layers for neurodivergent wellbeing

Neurodivergent people may need layers often missing from generic self-care advice: sensory adjustments, predictable routines, recovery after social contact, body doubling, communication support, safe foods, visual planning, reduced transitions or permission not to mask. These can be legitimate parts of a support system.

## What self-care cannot do

Layered self-care can increase resilience, but it should not place responsibility for harmful circumstances entirely on the individual. Self-care cannot make an unsafe relationship safe, remove discrimination, create adequate income, cure illness or make an inaccessible workplace accessible.

Sometimes the layer that needs strengthening is external: advocacy, safeguarding, healthcare, financial assistance, workplace adjustment, social care or practical change.

## A seven-day layer-building exercise

- Day 1 - Map your existing layers without judging them.
- Day 2 - Identify the first signs that pressure is building.
- Day 3 - Notice one current gap and what is causing it.
- Day 4 - Strengthen one basic layer: rest, food, hydration, medication or environment.
- Day 5 - Add one human connection or practical support.
- Day 6 - Review professional and urgent-support options before you need them.
- Day 7 - Notice what is holding you. Keep useful layers and adapt the rest.

## Books and further exploration

- *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?* - Dr Julie Smith.
- *Burnout* - Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski.
- *The Compassionate Mind* - Paul Gilbert.
- *Anchored* - Deb Dana.

## Clinical and source notes

The Swiss cheese model is associated with James Reason's work on human error and organisational safety. It describes multiple defensive layers, each with potential weaknesses, and how adverse outcomes may occur when weaknesses align. The self-care version in this guide is an original educational adaptation of that layered-defence metaphor; it should not be presented as Reason's clinical or therapeutic model.

Additional wellbeing content is informed by general NHS public guidance on mental wellbeing, stress and accessing support, NHS Every Mind Matters self-care information, and Mind wellbeing resources. This guide is educational and does not replace individual medical or mental-health assessment.

## When life feels like too much

Feeling overwhelmed does not always mean you need to become stronger. It may mean too many layers have become thin at the same time. Look at what is missing, what is overloaded and what can be supported from somewhere else.

One layer may be enough to get you through today. Over time, several imperfect layers can create something much stronger than relying on one perfect strategy.

***You are allowed to be supported from more than one direction. Strength is not having no gaps; it is having somewhere to turn when a gap appears.***

**Space to Breathe Therapy** - Strengthening your support layers, one realistic step at a time.