

Responsibility Pie

A helpful way to see what is — and is not — your responsibility

When something difficult happens, it is very easy to place the whole weight of the situation on yourself. You may think, “It was all my fault,” “I should have prevented it,” or “I am responsible for how everybody feels.” A Responsibility Pie is a simple CBT-informed exercise that helps you slow that conclusion down and look at the wider picture.

Rather than deciding immediately that you carry 100% of the responsibility, you identify all the people, circumstances, pressures, misunderstandings, systems, timing and other factors that may have contributed. You then divide a circle into sections to represent each contribution.

What the exercise can help with

A Responsibility Pie can be particularly useful when you are experiencing guilt, shame, self-blame, perfectionism, anxiety, conflict, people-pleasing or a strong sense that you should have been able to control an outcome. It can also help when hindsight makes an event seem more predictable than it actually was at the time.

The aim is not to avoid genuine responsibility. It is to make responsibility more accurate. Sometimes you will identify something you would like to do differently next time. At the same time, you may recognise that other people had choices too, that you did not have all the information, or that some factors were completely outside your control.

How to Create Your Responsibility Pie

1. Describe the situation

Write down the situation in one or two neutral sentences. Try to describe what happened rather than beginning with a judgement about yourself.

2. Notice your first conclusion

Ask yourself: "How responsible do I feel for what happened?" Give yourself a percentage from 0–100%. Do not worry about whether it is accurate yet; this is simply your starting point.

3. List every contributing factor

Think broadly. Who else was involved? What information did each person have? Were there time pressures, unclear communication, expectations, organisational problems, illness, tiredness, previous events, competing needs, chance or circumstances outside anyone's control?

4. Allocate the pieces

Give each factor a slice of the pie. It can help to allocate the other factors first and your own contribution last. The whole circle must add up to 100%.

5. Look again

Compare your final slice with the percentage you gave yourself at the beginning. Ask: "What does this more balanced picture tell me?"

Important: the percentages are not scientific measurements. The value of the exercise is in widening your perspective and challenging an automatic assumption that everything rests with you.

Responsibility Pie Worksheet

Situation: _____

My first estimate of my responsibility: _____ %

Who or what else contributed?

Factor / person / circumstance	Possible contribution
1. _____	_____ %
2. _____	_____ %
3. _____	_____ %
4. _____	_____ %
5. _____	_____ %
6. _____	_____ %
My contribution	_____ %
TOTAL	100 %

After completing the pie, what do I notice?

Questions That Can Make the Picture Clearer

When self-blame is strong, the mind often leaves important information out. These questions can help you bring it back in.

What did I know at the time? Avoid judging your past self using information you only learned afterwards.

What was actually within my control? Separate your choices from other people's reactions, decisions and behaviour.

What responsibility belonged to the other people involved? Adults generally have responsibility for their own choices, communication and boundaries too.

What external factors mattered? Consider systems, workload, timing, resources, unclear instructions, unexpected events and environmental pressures.

Am I confusing influence with control? You can influence a situation without having the power to determine its outcome.

Would I give somebody else 100% responsibility in the same circumstances? If not, consider why you are applying a harsher standard to yourself.

Is there a useful part of responsibility I do want to keep? Balanced thinking does not mean saying you played no part. You might decide to apologise, communicate differently, repair something, set a boundary or make another choice next time.

The most helpful conclusion is often neither "everything was my fault" nor "none of it was my responsibility." It is a more nuanced understanding of what belonged to you and what did not.

When You Tend to Carry Everyone Else's Responsibility

Some people automatically take responsibility for keeping the peace, preventing disappointment, anticipating other people's needs or making sure nobody is upset. Over time, this can make your own slice of almost every responsibility pie feel enormous.

You may notice thoughts such as:

- "If they are upset, I must have done something wrong."
- "I should have known what they needed."
- "It is my job to fix this."
- "If I say no, I am letting them down."
- "I should be able to keep everybody happy."

Try replacing these with more balanced questions: Did the other person communicate what they needed? Were their expectations reasonable? Did I have enough information? Am I allowed to have needs too? Is their disappointment uncomfortable, or does it actually mean I have done something wrong?

Responsibility and boundaries

Healthy responsibility includes recognising your behaviour, making repairs where appropriate and learning from mistakes. Healthy boundaries include recognising that you cannot manage another person's thoughts, feelings or choices for them.

A useful sentence can be: *"I can take responsibility for my part without taking responsibility for the whole."*

Repeated use of the Responsibility Pie can help you notice patterns. If your first estimate is regularly close to 100%, that in itself may be useful information to explore.

A Message From Me

If you are someone who has spent years taking responsibility for everything around you, it can feel surprisingly uncomfortable to put some of that responsibility back where it belongs. You may even worry that doing so makes you uncaring or selfish.

It does not. Looking at responsibility fairly is not about escaping accountability. It is about stopping yourself from carrying weight that was never entirely yours.

When you complete your pie, try not to search for the 'perfect' percentages. Notice instead what happens when you allow other factors into the picture. Perhaps you did have a part to play. Perhaps there is something you want to repair or learn from. But your part is not automatically the whole story.

You are allowed to recognise what belonged to the circumstances, what belonged to somebody else and what simply could not have been predicted or controlled.

Use this exercise gently. Curiosity is much more useful here than punishment.

Space to Breathe Therapy

This resource is for psychoeducation and self-reflection. It is not a substitute for individual mental-health assessment or treatment.