

The Swiss Cheese Model of Self-Care

Building layers of support around ourselves

Self-care is often presented as though one good habit should be enough to keep us well. Real life is rarely that simple. The Swiss Cheese Model offers a more realistic picture: every layer of support has gaps, but several imperfect layers together can make it harder for stress, setbacks and difficult events to pass straight through.

Where the idea comes from

The original Swiss Cheese Model was developed by psychologist James Reason to explain how accidents can occur in complex systems. Each defensive layer can contain weaknesses or 'holes'; harm becomes more likely when those weaknesses line up. In this resource, the model is used as a **self-care metaphor**, not as Reason's original clinical or safety model: rather than relying on one coping strategy, we build several forms of support around ourselves.

The five self-care layers

Layer	What it can include	Questions to ask
Physical	Sleep, hydration, food, movement, medication/healthcare, rest, pain management.	What does my body need today? What is draining physical capacity?
Emotional	Naming feelings, self-understanding, expression, boundaries, soothing, therapy.	What am I feeling? What need might sit underneath it?
Mental	Breaks from thinking, realistic expectations, planning, reducing overload, perspective.	What can wait? What can be simplified?
Social	Safe people, belonging, practical help, asking for support, reducing harmful contact.	Who helps me feel safer or less alone?
Meaning / spiritual	Values, purpose, creativity, nature, faith if relevant, gratitude, reflection.	What helps life feel meaningful or connected for me?

The important part is not creating perfect layers. It is noticing where support has become thin and adding another layer before expecting yourself to simply cope harder.

Finding the holes in your current support

A 'hole' is not a personal failure. It might be a poor night's sleep, illness, money pressure, sensory overload, conflict, loneliness, grief, a deadline, caring responsibilities, hormonal changes or simply having too much to do. Holes also move: a strategy that protected you last month may not be available today.

Layer check-in

Layer	Strong today	Needs attention	One small support I can add
Physical	■	■	_____
Emotional	■	■	_____
Mental	■	■	_____
Social	■	■	_____
Meaning / values	■	■	_____

When several holes line up

Imagine you are sleeping badly, skipping meals, working under pressure, withdrawing from friends and losing time for activities that normally give you meaning. None of these alone necessarily causes a crisis, but together they reduce the number of protective layers available. The answer is not always a dramatic intervention. It may be several small repairs across different layers.

Small repairs can include

- cancelling or postponing one non-essential demand
- eating or drinking something manageable
- making a health appointment you have been putting off
- reducing sensory input for an hour
- telling one trusted person that things are difficult
- asking for practical rather than emotional help
- returning to a familiar routine
- creating ten minutes without decisions or notifications
- reconnecting with something that matters to you.

Self-care versus self-pressure

If a self-care plan becomes another standard you can fail, it stops functioning as support. The question is not “Am I doing all five layers properly?” but “Which layer would make the biggest difference with the least demand right now?”

My smallest useful step today

The layer I want to strengthen: _____

The smallest realistic action: _____

What might get in the way: _____

A backup version requiring less energy: _____

Design your own layers of protection

Use this page to build a personalised system. Include strategies you genuinely use rather than the things you think you 'should' do.

My layer	What already supports me	What could strengthen this layer?
Physical		
Emotional		
Mental		
Social		
Meaning / spiritual		

Create a difficult-day version

Plans often fail when they are designed for our best days. Make a lower-demand version for days when capacity is limited.

If I cannot...	My lower-demand alternative
Exercise	_____
Cook / prepare food	_____
Talk about how I feel	_____
Complete my usual routine	_____
Socialise	_____

Concentrate for long	
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Keeping the layers flexible

Your protective layers will change across different seasons of life. During illness, bereavement, burnout, major change or high work pressure, you may need more external support and fewer expectations. At other times you may have enough capacity to strengthen routines, relationships or longer-term goals.

Weekly layer review

Question	Reflection
Where did stress get through this week?	
Which layer protected me well?	
Which layer felt thin or unavailable?	
Did I ask for enough support?	
What am I carrying that can be reduced?	
What one layer will I strengthen next week?	

A message from Maggie

Self-care does not need to be perfect to be protective. Most of us have gaps somewhere, particularly when life becomes demanding. I like this model because it moves us away from the idea that one routine, one therapy or one coping strategy should carry everything. We can build support in layers. When one layer is struggling, another may hold us for a while. Look at what is missing with curiosity rather than criticism, and make the next step small enough to be possible.

Further reading & resources

James Reason: *Human Error* - the original systems-safety thinking associated with the Swiss Cheese Model. The self-care adaptation in this workbook is a metaphorical application, not Reason's original model.

World Health Organization: information on self-care interventions and the role of individuals, families and communities in supporting health and wellbeing.

NHS Every Mind Matters: practical wellbeing and mental-health guidance, including stress, sleep and self-care ideas.

Mind: information and support for mental health, including everyday ways to look after wellbeing and guidance on seeking help.

This resource supports reflection and planning; it is not a substitute for individual medical or mental-health care. If distress is persistent, worsening or affecting your safety or ability to function, seek appropriate professional support.