

Check In, Don't Check Out

Small, practical ways to notice what is happening before you reach empty - and to respond to yourself with greater awareness, choice and care.

Why checking in matters

Life can move quickly enough that we become very good at functioning while losing contact with how we actually are. We answer messages, work, care for other people, solve problems and push through tiredness. Sometimes we do not realise how overwhelmed, hungry, tense, lonely or depleted we have become until our capacity suddenly disappears.

A check-in is a deliberate interruption to autopilot. It is not a demand to analyse everything. It can be as simple as noticing: *What is happening in my body? What am I feeling? What do I need? What is one helpful response I can make now?*

Check in, don't check out

'Checking out' can look different for different people: going numb, withdrawing, scrolling for hours, overworking, drinking, sleeping excessively, shutting down, snapping at people, avoiding messages or simply disconnecting from your own needs. These behaviours may be attempts to cope. The aim is not to shame them; it is to notice earlier when your system is asking for support.

A 60-second check-in

- **Body:** Where am I holding tension? Am I hungry, thirsty, in pain, too hot/cold, overstimulated or exhausted?
- **Emotion:** What feeling is closest - anxious, irritated, sad, lonely, flat, pressured, angry, excited, disappointed?
- **Thoughts:** Is my mind racing, looping, catastrophising, criticising or struggling to focus?
- **Capacity:** How much do I realistically have left today - not how much do I think I should have?
- **Need:** Do I need rest, food, movement, quiet, connection, information, reassurance, a boundary, help or time?
- **Next step:** What is the smallest useful response I can make in the next ten minutes?

Carl Rogers and the value of noticing

Person-centred work places importance on understanding experience rather than immediately correcting it. When we can notice what is true for us without performing or judging it, we create the conditions for more genuine choice.

"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change." - Carl R. Rogers, On Becoming a Person (1961).

Checking in is not self-indulgence. It can be an act of congruence: allowing your internal experience to be included in the decisions you make.

Early warning signs that you may be running low

- Becoming unusually irritable, tearful, restless or emotionally flat.
- Finding ordinary decisions disproportionately difficult.
- Noise, touch, conversation or demands becoming harder to tolerate.
- Skipping meals, forgetting water or losing track of basic needs.
- Withdrawing from people while also feeling lonely.
- Feeling that every request is 'too much'.
- Racing thoughts, poor concentration, mistakes or losing words.
- Using more alcohol, scrolling, spending or other fast-relief behaviours.
- Thinking 'I just need to get through today' repeatedly without recovery afterwards.

Respond Before You Reach Empty

Look after the basics - without making them simplistic

Sleep, food, hydration, movement and fresh air are sometimes described as though they solve every mental-health difficulty. They do not. But when these needs are repeatedly missed, emotional regulation becomes harder. Treat the basics as part of your support structure rather than as a judgement about how well you are coping.

Talk it out

Connection can help organise an overloaded mind. Talking may mean a friend, partner, coach, therapist, colleague, peer-support group or trusted family member. You can also write, voice-note or type what you are experiencing if spoken language feels difficult. You do not need a polished explanation before you are allowed to ask for support.

Set boundaries before resentment sets them for you

Sometimes the most useful check-in question is: *What am I continuing to say yes to when my body and mind are saying no?* Boundaries can protect time, sensory capacity, emotional energy, money, sleep and relationships. A boundary does not need a long defence.

Useful boundary phrases

- "I can't take that on today."
- "I need some time before I answer."
- "I can help with this part, but not all of it."
- "I'm not available this evening."
- "I need a quieter space to be able to concentrate."
- "I want to continue this conversation when I have more capacity."

Neurodivergent check-ins

Autistic and ADHD people may not always notice internal needs gradually. Interoceptive differences can mean hunger, thirst, pain, fatigue or emotional overload becomes obvious only when it is intense. Masking can also make it easier to notice everyone else's expectations than your own state. External prompts can help: scheduled alarms, visual scales, a body map, colour-coded capacity ratings, predictable decompression periods or a trusted person asking specific questions rather than 'Are you okay?'

Try a traffic-light check-in

GREEN - I have capacity	What helps me stay here? What basics and boundaries need protecting?
AMBER - pressure is building	What can I reduce, postpone, delegate or regulate before this becomes a crisis?
RED - I am at/over capacity	What can stop now? Who needs to know? What safety, rest or professional support do I need?

Build connection

Resilience is not simply an individual ability to tolerate more. People often cope better when they have somewhere to take their experience. Consider who helps you feel steadier, who listens without immediately fixing, who can offer practical support and where you can be yourself without excessive masking.

Focus on what helps you heal

Recovery and regulation are personal. Some people need quiet; others need movement. Some need company; others need protected solitude. Some need to understand the problem; others first need their body to settle. Your check-in should lead to a response that fits you rather than a generic wellbeing rule.

Your personal 'when I notice...' plan

When I notice tension building, I will: _____

When I become irritable or overwhelmed, I will: _____

When I start withdrawing, I can contact: _____

When I forget the basics, my easiest reset is: _____

A boundary that protects my wellbeing is: _____

One thing that reliably helps me feel more like myself: _____

Practical Check-In Worksheets

The five-area daily check-in

Area	Ask yourself	My response
Body	What sensations or physical needs am I noticing?	_____
Emotion	What am I feeling? How intense is it 0-10?	_____
Mind	What is my mind doing right now?	_____
Environment	What around me is helping or adding pressure?	_____
Need	What would support me in the next hour?	_____

Weekly reflection

- What drained me most this week?
- What restored me, even a little?
- Where did I ignore an early warning sign?
- Where did I respond to myself sooner?
- Which relationship felt supportive? Which felt costly?
- What did my body repeatedly ask for?
- What can I remove, simplify or ask for help with next week?
- What is one thing I want to protect in my diary?

When a wave hits

If you suddenly feel overwhelmed, reduce the task. Orient to where you are. Put both feet somewhere supported if that feels comfortable. Exhale slowly. Reduce sensory input where possible. Take a drink or food if needed. Name one feeling. Decide whether you need space or contact. Postpone non-urgent decisions. If you are unsafe, unable to cope or at risk of harming yourself or someone else, seek urgent professional or emergency support.

Progress may be quiet

Progress is not always dramatic. It may look like noticing overload twenty minutes earlier, cancelling one non-essential commitment, eating before you become shaky, telling someone you are struggling, taking a break without earning it first, or recognising that a bad day does not mean a bad life.

A gentle reminder

Some days will be hard and you are still allowed to have good moments. There is no correct way to feel. Rest is not a reward for reaching collapse. Your needs remain valid even when other people have needs too.

A Message From Maggie, Books & Resources

A message from Maggie

It is very easy to become the person who keeps going. You answer the next message, finish the next task, look after the next person and tell yourself you will stop later. The problem is that 'later' can keep moving until your mind or body stops you instead.

Checking in with yourself does not have to become another job to do perfectly. I would rather you pause for thirty honest seconds than create a complicated wellbeing routine you cannot sustain. Ask yourself how you actually are - not how you think you should be - and let the answer influence what you do next.

Sometimes the answer will be practical: eat, drink, sleep, move, turn the noise down. Sometimes it will be relational: talk to somebody, ask for help, say no, stop carrying something alone. Sometimes you may realise that what you are experiencing needs professional support. All of those answers are valid.

You matter before you reach breaking point. You do not have to wait until you have nothing left before your needs count.

Recommended reading

Carl R. Rogers - *On Becoming a Person*. Foundational person-centred writing on acceptance, congruence, relationship and psychological growth.

Russ Harris - *The Happiness Trap*. ACT-informed strategies for relating differently to difficult thoughts and feelings while moving towards what matters.

Emily & Amelia Nagoski - *Burnout*. An accessible exploration of stress, emotional exhaustion and completing the stress response.

Deb Dana - *Anchored*. Practical polyvagal-informed ideas for noticing nervous-system states and building cues of safety.

Where to find support

Depending on what is underneath your difficulties, useful starting points can include your GP, NHS mental-health services, talking therapies, a qualified counsellor or psychotherapist, coaching where appropriate, occupational health, workplace reasonable-adjustment routes, local voluntary organisations and condition-specific charities. If you are in immediate danger or there is a medical or mental-health emergency, use emergency services.

Clinical notes & references

Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On Becoming a Person*. Houghton Mifflin. • Harris, R. (2019). *The Happiness Trap*, 2nd ed. • Nagoski, E., & Nagoski, A. (2019). *Burnout*. • NICE guidance relevant to common mental-health problems and wellbeing should be consulted alongside individual clinical assessment where appropriate.

Note: This resource is for psychoeducation and coaching reflection. It does not diagnose a mental-health condition or replace individual medical or psychological care.

Space to Breathe Therapy - Maggie's Coaching