

# Pause and Check In

A practical guide to interrupting autopilot, noticing what your mind and body are telling you, and choosing your next step with greater awareness.

## Why pause?

When life is demanding, it is easy to move from one task, conversation or worry straight into the next. We can become so focused on coping that we stop noticing what coping is costing us. A pause creates a small gap in the momentum. It gives you an opportunity to notice your state before exhaustion, overwhelm or emotion makes the decision for you.

Pausing is not doing nothing. It is gathering information. Even thirty seconds can help you recognise whether you are hungry, tense, overstimulated, anxious, angry, lonely, confused, exhausted or simply carrying too many demands at once.

## The four-step pause

- **PAUSE:** stop adding another demand for a moment. Put the phone down, stop typing or simply become aware of where you are.
- **BREATHE:** allow your breathing to become comfortable. You do not need to force a deep breath; a gentle, slightly longer exhale may feel more settling.
- **CHECK IN:** notice body sensations, emotions, thoughts, sensory load and current capacity.
- **CHOOSE:** ask what would make the next few minutes or the next hour more manageable.

## Check in with the body first

The body often gives information before the mind has found words. Notice jaw tension, headaches, heaviness, restlessness, nausea, racing heart, shallow breathing, pain, thirst, hunger, temperature or a sudden change in sensory tolerance. These signs are not diagnoses, but they can prompt you to respond or seek appropriate medical advice when needed.

## Check in with your emotional state

You do not need a perfect label. Try broad categories first: activated or flat; comfortable or uncomfortable; connected or disconnected. Then ask whether words such as anxious, frustrated, sad, pressured, lonely, disappointed, resentful, relieved or hopeful fit.

## Carl Rogers and the value of acceptance

A person-centred approach invites us to begin with what is actually present rather than what we believe should be present. This can soften the struggle against our own experience and make more thoughtful choices possible.

*"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).*

## Check in with capacity, not expectations

Capacity changes. Sleep, illness, pain, sensory demands, grief, hormones, workload, conflict, executive-function demands and caring responsibilities all influence what you have available. Ask: *What do I realistically have left today?* rather than *What should I be able to manage?*

# Pause Before Pressure Becomes Overwhelm

## Early signs that a pause may be needed

- Ordinary requests suddenly feel irritating or impossible.
- You are making more mistakes, losing words or struggling to decide.
- Noise, light, touch or conversation becomes harder to tolerate.
- You keep telling yourself you will eat, drink or rest 'after this one thing'.
- You are scrolling, working or staying busy without really choosing to.
- You feel an urge to withdraw from everybody or escape immediately.
- You are agreeing to things before checking whether you have capacity.
- You are repeatedly thinking 'I just need to get through today'.

## A pause is not always relaxation

Sometimes a useful pause leads to rest. At other times it leads to action: making a phone call, eating something, asking for help, leaving a noisy environment, setting a boundary, taking medication as prescribed, cancelling a non-essential task or seeking professional support. The purpose is not to become calm at all costs; it is to respond more accurately.

## Neurodivergent pause points

Autistic and ADHD people may not notice internal signals gradually. Interoceptive differences can mean hunger, thirst, fatigue, pain or emotional activation becomes obvious only when intense. Executive-function demands can also make it difficult to stop once momentum has started, while hyperfocus may override bodily cues.

External pause prompts can help: alarms between appointments, a visual card on your desk, transition time in the diary, regular food and drink prompts, sensory checklists, a capacity scale, body doubling or a trusted person asking specific questions.

## Try the SENSORY check

- **Sound:** Is noise costing more than usual?
- **Eyes:** Is the light, screen or visual clutter too much?
- **Need for movement:** Have I been still too long, or do I need to reduce movement?
- **Skin/body:** Is clothing, temperature, pain or touch adding load?
- **Other people:** Do I need connection, less conversation or time without masking?
- **Recovery:** When was the last genuine transition or decompression period?

## Pause before saying yes

Before agreeing to a request, ask: Do I have time? Do I have energy? What will this yes displace? Am I choosing freely or reacting to guilt, fear or habit? A short phrase such as 'Let me check and come back to you' can create enough space to answer more honestly.

## Pause during conflict

When emotions are high, continuing the conversation is not always productive. A pause can protect the relationship as well as the individual. Try: 'I want to talk about this, but I need twenty minutes to settle first.' Make the pause clear rather than disappearing without explanation where possible.

## When the urge is for immediate relief

Alcohol, scrolling, spending, overeating, restriction, overworking or withdrawing can offer rapid relief from difficult states. Instead of beginning with shame, pause and ask what the behaviour is promising: numbness, escape, stimulation, control, comfort, sleep or connection. Understanding the function makes it easier to build alternatives.

## A two-minute reset

- Put both feet or your body somewhere supported if comfortable.
- Notice five things in the room without needing to name them aloud.
- Unclench one area of tension.
- Take a drink or suitable food if needed.
- Rate your capacity from 0-10.
- Choose one next action - not the whole plan.

# Your Pause and Check In Toolkit

## The quick check-in

| AREA     | QUESTION                                 | MY CHECK-IN |
|----------|------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Body     | What physical signals am I noticing?     | _____       |
| Emotion  | What feeling or state is closest?        | _____       |
| Mind     | What is my thinking doing?               | _____       |
| Sensory  | What is adding or reducing sensory load? | _____       |
| Capacity | How much do I realistically have left?   | _____       |
| Need     | What would support the next hour?        | _____       |

## My pause plan

- I know I need to pause when: \_\_\_\_\_
- My earliest body sign is: \_\_\_\_\_
- My earliest behaviour sign is: \_\_\_\_\_
- A sensory adjustment that helps: \_\_\_\_\_
- Someone I can contact: \_\_\_\_\_
- A boundary phrase I can use: \_\_\_\_\_
- My easiest basic-needs reset: \_\_\_\_\_

## Traffic-light capacity check

**GREEN:** I have usable capacity. Protect what keeps me here.

**AMBER:** Pressure is building. Reduce, postpone, delegate or regulate now.

**RED:** I am at or beyond capacity. Stop non-essential demands, prioritise safety/basic needs and bring in support.

## Weekly reflection

- When did I notice pressure early this week?
- When did I keep pushing after my body asked me to stop?
- What situations repeatedly increase my load?
- What genuinely helped rather than only distracted me?
- Which boundary protected my wellbeing?
- Where did I need more support?
- What can I build into next week before I become depleted?

## If pausing makes feelings louder

For some people, stopping can initially make anxiety, grief, trauma memories or internal sensations more noticeable. You do not have to force a long mindfulness exercise. Use short, practical pauses and keep some attention on the present environment. Trauma-informed or professional support may be useful if internal attention regularly triggers panic, dissociation or overwhelming distress.

## When to seek additional support

- Low mood, anxiety, panic or distress is persistent or worsening.
- Sleep, eating, work, relationships or daily functioning are significantly affected.
- You are increasingly relying on alcohol, substances or harmful coping strategies.
- You experience frequent shutdown, dissociation or episodes of overwhelming emotion.
- You are self-harming, having suicidal thoughts or do not feel able to keep yourself safe.

## Urgent support

If there is immediate danger or a medical or mental-health emergency in the UK, call 999 or attend A&E.; NHS 111 and local urgent mental-health services can also direct you to appropriate urgent support. You do not have to wait until things become unbearable before asking for help.

# A Message From Maggie, Books & Resources

## A message from Maggie

Pausing can sound like such a small thing, but it can be surprisingly difficult when you have spent years pushing through. You may be used to answering immediately, keeping everybody else comfortable, finishing one more task or telling yourself you will deal with your own needs later.

I want this resource to give you permission to create a little space before the next thing. Not a perfect meditation. Not another routine to succeed at. Just enough space to ask: How am I? What is my body telling me? What do I actually have left? What would help?

Sometimes the answer will be to carry on. Sometimes it will be to stop. Sometimes you will need food, quiet, movement, reassurance, a boundary or another person. And sometimes your check-in may show you that what you are experiencing needs professional support.

The pause matters because you matter before you reach empty. You do not have to earn rest by breaking down first, and you do not have to explain every need perfectly before it counts.

## Recommended reading

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

**Russ Harris - *The Happiness Trap*.** ACT-informed approaches to noticing thoughts and feelings while choosing meaningful action.

**Emily Nagoski & Amelia Nagoski - *Burnout*.** Explores stress, exhaustion and completing the stress response.

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

## Further resources

Useful support can include your GP, NHS talking therapies or mental-health services, a qualified counsellor or psychotherapist, neurodivergent-affirming support, occupational health, workplace reasonable adjustments and specialist services where relevant. Coaching can support awareness and practical change but does not replace clinical treatment where treatment is required.

## 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*. • Dana, D. (2021). *Anchored*. • NICE guidance relevant to common mental-health problems should be consulted alongside individual clinical assessment where appropriate.

**Note:** This resource is for coaching reflection and psychoeducation. It does not diagnose a condition or replace individual medical, psychological or emergency care.

**Space to Breathe Therapy - Maggie's Coaching**