

Circles of Overwhelm

Place your energy where it can support you.

Overwhelm can make everything feel equally urgent. This guide separates what is yours to act on, what you may be able to influence, and what is outside your control. The aim is not to ignore difficult realities. It is to protect limited energy and make the next step more manageable.

CONTROL: ACT | **INFLUENCE: COMMUNICATE** | **CONCERNS: ACKNOWLEDGE AND RELEASE**

The three circles

CIRCLE OF CONTROL	Direct choices available now. Your breathing pace, how you speak to yourself, whether you take one small action, whether you pause, what you write down, and what you choose to do next.
CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE	Things you cannot command, but may be able to shape. How much you take on, who you ask for support, when you pause or disengage, how you communicate a need, and what preparation you put in place.
CIRCLE OF CONCERNS	Things that matter but are not yours to control. Sudden change, other people's urgency, past events, future uncertainty, another person's opinion, and outcomes that have not happened yet.

Why this can help

When the nervous system is under strain, the mind can scan widely for unfinished tasks, possible problems and other people's needs. Sorting the load into these circles can reduce the pressure to solve everything at once. It also helps distinguish **responsibility** from **care**: you can care deeply about something without being able to control it.

A useful question is not “How do I fix all of this?” but “Where would my energy be most useful today?”

Using the Circles When Overwhelm Is Building

Start with the body before the problem

If you are already overloaded, complex reflection may be too demanding. Reduce input first: sit somewhere quieter, lower unnecessary noise or light where possible, loosen your pace, drink something, eat if you have missed food, and give yourself a few minutes without additional decisions. Regulation does not have to be perfect before you continue.

1. Name the load without judging it

Write down what is crowding your mind. Keep each item short. Include practical tasks, worries, people's requests, sensory demands, uncertainty and emotional pressure. The purpose is to get the load out of working memory rather than make a perfect list.

2. Sort, do not solve

Place each item into Control, Influence or Concerns. If you are unsure, ask: **Can I directly decide this?** If not, **can I communicate, request, prepare or set a boundary?** If neither applies, it probably belongs in Concerns for now.

3. Choose one control action

Pick a small action that can be completed or clearly started. Examples include sending one message, drinking a glass of water, writing the first sentence, moving one appointment, setting a ten-minute timer, or deciding that today's task is recovery.

4. Choose one influence action

Influence is often communication. Ask for clarification, request more time, tell someone what you can realistically manage, ask for practical help, negotiate priorities, or explain the conditions that help you function.

5. Give concerns somewhere to go

Releasing a concern does not mean pretending it does not matter. Try: "This matters to me, but it is not mine to solve right now." Write it in a parking-list, schedule a later review if needed, then deliberately return attention to what is actionable.

When everything still feels urgent

What overwhelm says	A lower-demand response
"I have to do all of it."	What is the one action that protects today?
"They need an answer now."	Is their urgency actually my deadline?
"I should be coping better."	What demand can be reduced rather than endured?
"I cannot stop thinking about it."	Can I write it down and choose a review time?
"If I rest, I am failing."	Recovery is an action when capacity is depleted.

You do not have to earn a pause by finishing everything first. Sometimes the most effective control action is reducing the demand.

My Circles of Overwhelm - Worksheet

Use this page when your mind is carrying too much. Short phrases are enough.

STEP 1 - What is taking up space in my head right now?

STEP 2 - Sort the load

CONTROL - I can act	INFLUENCE - I can communicate	CONCERNS - I cannot control

STEP 3 - My next small action

STEP 4 - One thing I can ask for, communicate or change

STEP 5 - One concern I am giving myself permission to put down for now

Reflection: Where would my energy be most useful today?

Support, Reflection and Further Reading

A message from Maggie

When overwhelm arrives, it can feel as though every problem, every unfinished task and every person's expectation has landed in the same place. I want this page to help you separate the load. Some things need an action. Some need a conversation. Some are painful or important but are not yours to control. You are allowed to use your energy carefully. Choose the next useful step, not every possible step. - Maggie

For partners, family and supporters

Support is often more useful when it reduces cognitive load rather than adding advice. Ask one clear question at a time. Help identify what is genuinely urgent. Offer a concrete choice such as "Would it help if I made the call or sat with you while you do it?" Respect a request for quiet or processing time. Avoid turning overwhelm into a debate about effort, motivation or character.

At work, education or in caring roles

The circles can be used to clarify workload and boundaries. Control may include how you structure a task or record information. Influence may include requesting written instructions, agreeing priorities, asking for a quieter workspace, negotiating deadlines or sharing responsibilities. Concerns may include organisational decisions, other people's reactions and events outside your role.

Books and resources

The Happiness Trap - Russ Harris. Practical acceptance and commitment therapy ideas for making room for difficult thoughts while acting on what matters.

How to ADHD - Jessica McCabe. Accessible strategies for understanding ADHD-related executive-function challenges and building workable supports.

Taking Charge of Adult ADHD - Russell A. Barkley. Practical information about adult ADHD, organisation and daily functioning.

Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before? - Dr Julie Smith. Broad, accessible psychological tools for difficult emotions and everyday mental health.

Professional context and sources

NICE NG87: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: diagnosis and management. Includes discussion of functional impact, environmental modifications and support needs.

NHS: ADHD in adults. General information on adult ADHD, difficulties that may affect everyday functioning and available support.

Covey, S. R. The control/influence/concern framework is commonly associated with Covey's Circle of Concern and Circle of Influence model. This resource adapts that general coaching idea for overwhelm; it is not a diagnostic or clinical assessment tool.

Safety and scope

This is an educational and coaching resource, not a substitute for personalised clinical care. Overwhelm can occur with many experiences and conditions. If overwhelm is persistent, severely affecting daily life, or accompanied by hopelessness, thoughts of self-harm or feeling unsafe, seek appropriate professional or urgent support.

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