

# Circles of Stress

## Place your energy where it can support you.

Stress can make the whole day feel like one large emergency. The Circles of Stress tool helps separate **what you can act on**, **what you may be able to influence**, and **what is outside your control**. It is not about dismissing pressure. It is about deciding where your limited energy has the best chance of helping.

CONTROL: ACT | INFLUENCE: COMMUNICATE | CONCERNS: RELEASE

## Understanding the three circles

|                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>CIRCLE OF CONTROL</b>   | <b>My response right now.</b> One boundary I can set. My recovery routine. My pace. Whether I take a short break. The next action I choose. These are not always easy choices, but they are the closest part of the situation to you. |
| <b>CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE</b> | <b>My workload priorities.</b> How I communicate pressure. What support I request. Whether I ask for clarity, negotiate a deadline, delegate, rearrange a task or tell somebody what is becoming unmanageable.                        |
| <b>CIRCLE OF CONCERNS</b>  | <b>Other people's reactions.</b> Unexpected disruptions. Decisions already made. Wider organisational pressures, delays, other people's behaviour and events that cannot be changed by effort alone.                                  |

## Stress is not only a thought

Stress can show up physically and cognitively: a racing mind, muscle tension, headaches, stomach discomfort, irritability, difficulty concentrating, sleep disruption, rushing, freezing, avoiding tasks or feeling unable to decide what comes first. When stress rises, reducing the number of decisions can be as useful as adding another coping technique.

**Reflection prompt: Where would my energy be most useful today?**

# Working With Stress Instead of Fighting It

## First: reduce the immediate load

Before trying to solve the entire situation, identify what is making this moment harder. Is there noise, hunger, thirst, a missed break, too many tabs or messages, an unclear priority, a difficult conversation, or several demands arriving together? Remove or reduce one source of pressure where possible.

## A practical five-step stress reset

### 1. Notice

Name what is happening without turning it into a judgement: "My stress is high and my thinking is getting crowded."

### 2. Stabilise

Slow the pace. Sit down if helpful, unclench your jaw or shoulders, breathe at a comfortable pace, drink, eat if needed, and reduce unnecessary sensory input.

### 3. Sort

Put each pressure into Control, Influence or Concerns. Do not solve it yet.

### 4. Act or communicate

Choose one control action and, if useful, one influence action. Keep both small and specific.

### 5. Recover

After the immediate demand, give the nervous system a genuine downshift rather than moving straight into the next pressure.

## Boundaries are stress-management tools

A boundary can be practical rather than confrontational: "I can do A today; B will need to move." "I need the priority in writing." "I cannot take another task until we decide what comes off the list." "I can talk about this after I have had ten minutes to reset." Boundaries work best when they describe what you can realistically do rather than trying to control another person's response.

## When the stress comes from work or caring responsibilities

Look for repeated pressure points rather than treating every difficult day as an isolated failure. Consider workload, interruptions, unclear expectations, emotional labour, sensory demands, lack of recovery time, responsibility without authority, and whether you are routinely absorbing other people's urgency.

**Stress can be a signal that the demand, environment, pace or level of responsibility needs adjusting - not simply a sign that you need to become better at tolerating it.**

# My Circles of Stress - Worksheet

Use short phrases. This is a thinking aid, not another task to complete perfectly.

## What is creating pressure for me today?

## Sort the pressure

| CONTROL<br>I can act | INFLUENCE<br>I can communicate/request | CONCERNS<br>I cannot control |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------|
|                      |                                        |                              |

## My one useful action today

## One boundary or support request that could reduce pressure

## One concern I am choosing not to carry as a task

## What would recovery look like after this pressure?

Reflection: Where would my energy be most useful today?

# Support, Recovery and Further Reading

## A message from Maggie

Stress can make you feel as though you should move faster just when your system needs less pressure. You do not have to respond to every demand at the speed it arrives. Look at what is actually yours, what needs a conversation and what cannot be solved by carrying it harder. One boundary, one request or one small action can be enough for this moment. Your recovery matters too. - Maggie

## For partners, family and supporters

When somebody is stressed, repeated questions and rapid problem-solving can add to the load. Try one clear question: "What would help most right now - practical help, quiet, or talking it through?" Offer specific support rather than vague instructions to relax. If the person needs time before a conversation, agree when you will return to it.

## Workplace and education ideas

Helpful adjustments may include written priorities, clearer deadlines, reduced interruptions, predictable check-ins, quieter working arrangements, permission to use headphones where appropriate, breaking larger tasks into stages, and agreeing what should be deprioritised when new urgent work arrives.

## Books and resources

**Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?** - Dr Julie Smith. Accessible psychological tools for stress and difficult emotions.

**Burnout** - Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski. Explores stress, recovery and the completion of the stress response.

**The Happiness Trap** - Russ Harris. Acceptance and commitment therapy approaches to difficult thoughts and values-based action.

**How to ADHD** - Jessica McCabe. Practical strategies for executive-function load where ADHD is part of the picture.

## Professional information

**NHS - Stress.** Public information on recognising stress, possible physical and emotional signs, self-help and when to seek further support.

**NICE guidance.** NICE guidance across mental-health and neurodevelopmental conditions emphasises assessment of functional impact, individual circumstances and appropriate support. This Circles resource is a coaching and psychoeducational tool rather than a diagnostic framework.

**Circle of Concern / Circle of Influence.** The broad control-and-influence framework is commonly associated with Stephen R. Covey and has been adapted here specifically for stress reflection.

## When to seek more support

Consider speaking with a GP or appropriate professional if stress is persistent, worsening, affecting sleep, eating, work, relationships or everyday functioning, or if the strategies you usually rely on are no longer enough. If you feel unsafe or have thoughts of harming yourself, seek urgent support.

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