

Circles of Relationship Strain

Understand, communicate and find balance — without carrying responsibility for everything that happens between two people.

Relationship strain can make every disagreement feel urgent. We may start trying to manage another person's feelings, predict their reaction, solve old wounds and keep the relationship stable all at once. The circles model helps separate your responsibility from theirs. It supports clearer boundaries, safer communication and more realistic use of emotional energy.

CIRCLE OF CONTROL	CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE	CIRCLE OF CONCERNS
My words and tone My boundaries When I pause My choices and self-care Whether I seek support	Inviting honest dialogue Making a clear request Choosing repair Negotiating routines Suggesting support	Another person's choices Whether they understand Their readiness to change Their past experiences The final outcome

The aim is not to stop caring. It is to care without taking ownership of another adult's thoughts, choices or emotional work.

When strain starts taking over

You may notice rehearsing conversations repeatedly, checking another person's mood, over-explaining, people-pleasing, withdrawing, snapping, feeling responsible for keeping the peace, losing sleep over what they might think, or abandoning your own needs to avoid conflict. These can be signs that too much energy has moved into the concerns circle.

Circle of control: come back to yourself

You can choose your words, decide whether now is a safe or useful time to talk, state a boundary, take time before replying, regulate your own body, ask for support and decide what behaviour you will or will not remain around. A boundary describes what you will do; it is not a tool for forcing somebody else to behave differently.

Circle of influence: communicate clearly

You may be able to invite a calmer conversation, explain impact without attacking character, make a specific request, agree practical routines, clarify misunderstandings and offer a route towards repair. Influence requires space for the other person to answer freely — including the possibility that they may not agree.

Circle of concerns: what cannot be carried for them

You cannot make somebody understand, apologise sincerely, change, communicate respectfully, attend therapy, forgive, trust or become ready for repair. You can decide what their choices mean for your own boundaries and next steps.

Practical Ways to Reduce Relationship Strain

When this happens	Try this
The conversation becomes heated	Pause the content. Agree a time to return if appropriate. Regulation first can make later communication more useful.
You are explaining the same point repeatedly	State the key message once more in simple language, then notice whether further explanation is helping or becoming an attempt to force understanding.
You fear disappointing them	Separate discomfort from danger. Another person may be unhappy with a boundary without the boundary being wrong.
You want immediate reassurance	Name what you need. If reassurance is unavailable, use another support or grounding strategy rather than escalating the conversation.
You keep carrying the whole relationship	List what you are doing to maintain connection and what the other person is contributing. Mutual relationships require participation from more than one person.

Communication that lowers pressure

Describe rather than diagnose: “When plans change without telling me, I feel unsettled” is clearer than telling somebody what kind of person they are.

Make one request: Ask for a concrete action rather than hoping the other person will infer what is needed.

Allow processing time: Not every conversation has to be completed immediately.

Repair matters: Healthy repair can include acknowledging impact, apologising where appropriate, changing behaviour and rebuilding trust through repeated actions.

When neurodivergence affects the relationship

Different processing speeds, sensory needs, communication styles, attention, memory and tolerance for uncertainty can create friction without either person intending harm. Helpful approaches may include written follow-up, direct language, fewer implied meanings, agreed quiet time, advance notice of plans and recognising that a need for processing time is not automatically rejection.

A message from Maggie

When a relationship matters, it is very easy to start believing you must find exactly the right words to make everything better. But connection is not something one person can manufacture alone. You can speak honestly, listen, repair your part, set boundaries and make space for the other person. You do not have to carry their part as well. Sometimes the kindest place to put your energy is back into your own circle.

My Relationship Strain Map

Complete this when you have enough space to reflect. The aim is not to decide who is right or wrong, but to identify where your energy can be used most effectively.

1. What is happening?

Write the factual version, without assumptions about motives.

2. What am I feeling and needing?

Name emotions, body signals and unmet needs.

3. What is actually in my control?

My words, tone, boundary, timing, response, self-care and next action.

4. What might I be able to influence?

A conversation, a request, a practical agreement, repair, outside support.

5. What belongs to the other person?

Their reaction, choices, willingness, interpretation, pace and readiness to change.

6. What boundary or next step would protect my wellbeing?

Write one clear action. Keep it realistic and within your own control.

Support, Safety & Further Reading

Relationship difficulties exist on a wide spectrum. Ordinary conflict, communication differences and periods of strain are not the same as coercive control or abuse. If you are frightened of a partner or family member, feel controlled, threatened or unsafe, a simple communication worksheet may not be the right intervention. Specialist domestic-abuse support can help you think about safety without requiring you to confront the person.

Books and further reading

Set Boundaries, Find Peace — Nedra Glover Tawwab. Practical exploration of boundaries and communication.

Hold Me Tight — Dr Sue Johnson. Relationship-focused material based on Emotionally Focused Therapy.

Nonviolent Communication — Marshall B. Rosenberg. A framework for observations, feelings, needs and requests.

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work — John Gottman & Nan Silver. Research-informed relationship principles and exercises.

UK support and professional context

Relate provides relationship counselling and information for couples, individuals and families.

NHS Talking Therapies may be relevant where anxiety or depression is affecting relationships and daily life, depending on local provision.

Refuge / National Domestic Abuse Helpline provides specialist support for women experiencing domestic abuse in England. Other specialist services are available for men and LGBTQ+ people.

Important note

This is an educational and coaching resource, not personalised clinical care. Relationship work should not be used to imply equal responsibility where there is abuse, coercion or fear. If you are in immediate danger, use the appropriate emergency services.

SPACE TO BREATHE THERAPY