

Circles of Recovery

Progress, not perfection — placing your energy where it can support healing, rebuilding and everyday life.

Recovery rarely moves in a straight line. There may be easier days, difficult days, pauses, changes of direction and periods when progress is hard to see. The Circles of Recovery model helps separate the parts of recovery you can act on today, the areas you may be able to influence over time, and the things that matter but cannot be forced or controlled.

CIRCLE OF CONTROL	CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE	CIRCLE OF CONCERNS
Today's gentle next step Eating, drinking and resting How I speak to myself My immediate choices Using coping strategies	Building a support network Changing routines slowly Asking for help Reviewing setbacks Creating a supportive environment	A fixed recovery timeline Other people's comparisons Never having a difficult day The past Other people's choices

Recovery does not require you to control the whole future. Sometimes recovery is simply choosing what supports you in the next hour.

What recovery can really look like

Recovery may mean symptom reduction, rebuilding confidence, learning to live alongside change, developing safer coping strategies, reconnecting with identity, accepting support, restoring routines or creating a life that works differently from before. The meaning of recovery is individual.

Circle of control: today's gentle next step

Focus on what is possible now: hydration, food that is manageable, medication as prescribed, rest, movement if helpful, attending an appointment, answering one message, reducing stimulation, practising a coping strategy or simply stopping before exhaustion. Small actions count.

Circle of influence: create conditions that support recovery

You may be able to influence your environment, ask for practical help, change routines gradually, discuss adjustments, build a support network, review what contributed to a setback and make future plans more realistic. Influence is usually gradual rather than immediate.

Circle of concerns: release the fixed timeline

You cannot guarantee when you will feel better, prevent every setback, change the past, control other people's opinions or make your recovery resemble somebody else's. Comparison can turn recovery into a performance. Your pace does not have to match anyone else's.

Recovery on Difficult Days

When recovery feels...	A more supportive response
Too slow	Look for changes in coping, awareness, boundaries or recovery time — not only the absence of symptoms.
Like you have gone backwards	Ask what increased the load. A setback can reveal a need for more support, less demand or a different strategy; it does not erase earlier progress.
Exhausting	Reduce the number of recovery tasks. Healing should not become another impossible workload.
Lonely	Identify one person, service, group or professional you can contact. Support can be practical as well as emotional.
Uncertain	Return to the next manageable action rather than demanding certainty about the entire future.

Pacing instead of pushing

Pacing means matching activity to current capacity and building gradually where appropriate. A boom-and-bust pattern — doing everything on a better day and then needing a long recovery — can make life harder. Consider creating three versions of a day: a higher-capacity day, an ordinary day and a minimum-demand day. All three can still contain meaningful recovery.

Supporting someone in recovery

Avoid imposing a timetable or comparing them with somebody else. Ask what support is useful today. Practical help may include transport, meals, childcare, reducing demands, accompanying them to appointments, helping organise information or simply providing calm company. Respect autonomy wherever possible and do not assume that a difficult day means they have stopped trying.

A message from Maggie

Recovery can become another place where we judge ourselves: I should be further along, I should be coping better, I should not still have difficult days. Try taking the word 'should' out for a moment. What does your body, mind or life actually need today? One gentle next step is still a step. A setback does not cancel everything you have learned, and needing support does not make your recovery less meaningful.

My Circles of Recovery Map

Use this page to bring recovery back to what is realistic and supportive today. You can return to it whenever circumstances change.

1. What does recovery mean to me?

Not somebody else's version — what would feeling safer, steadier or more able to live my life look like for me?

2. What is in my control today?

List up to three gentle actions. Keep them small enough to be achievable.

3. What can I influence over time?

Support, routines, environment, appointments, boundaries, adjustments, habits or practical help.

4. What am I trying to control that I cannot?

A timeline, another person's opinion, the past, never struggling again, or something else?

5. What helps on a difficult day?

People, places, sensory supports, food/drink, rest, distraction, grounding, medication as prescribed, professional support.

6. What would I like to remember after a setback?

Write a sentence you would want to read when shame, frustration or hopelessness is loud.

Building a Sustainable Recovery

Recovery is influenced by many factors: the nature of the difficulty, physical health, mental health, safety, housing, relationships, finances, access to services, neurodivergence, trauma, caring responsibilities and the amount of practical support available. A person should not be blamed when wider circumstances make recovery harder.

Helpful foundations

Basic needs: food, fluids, sleep and physical safety matter. Start with what is realistically accessible.

Predictability: simple routines can reduce the amount of decision-making required.

Connection: recovery is often easier when at least one safe person understands what is happening.

Meaning: interests, values, creativity, relationships and purpose can be part of recovery rather than rewards that must wait until you are 'better'.

Review: notice what genuinely helps and what only adds pressure.

Books and resources

The Compassionate Mind — Paul Gilbert. Explores compassionate approaches to distress and self-criticism.

Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before? — Dr Julie Smith. Accessible psychological tools for managing difficult emotional experiences.

Burnout — Emily Nagoski & Amelia Nagoski. Explores stress, recovery and completing the stress response.

NHS Every Mind Matters — practical UK mental-health information and self-care resources.

Mind — UK information about mental health, treatment, support and crisis options.

Important note

This resource is educational and does not replace individual medical or psychological care. Recovery plans should take account of the condition or circumstances involved. If you are becoming significantly more unwell, unable to meet basic needs, at immediate risk, or experiencing thoughts of harming yourself or someone else, seek appropriate professional or emergency support.

SPACE TO BREATHE THERAPY