

THE DOMINO EFFECT

When one small thing knocks into everything else

Sometimes you don't have to fix every domino. You just need to find the one you can stop.

When one thing starts affecting everything else

Dominoes give us a simple picture of something that can feel much more complicated in real life. One piece falls and knocks into the next, which changes the position of the next, and soon a whole line is moving because of one starting point. Mental health, physical wellbeing and everyday functioning can sometimes work in a similar way. Poor sleep can make concentration harder. Reduced concentration can make work take longer. Work then becomes more stressful, stress reduces patience, relationships become more strained and the resulting worry makes sleep even more difficult. By the time we notice the wider problem, it may feel as though everything is going wrong at once, even though several difficulties are connected.

Why chain reactions are easy to miss

When we are living inside a difficult period, we often deal with each problem as it appears. We focus on being late, forgetting something, feeling irritable, missing a meal, cancelling plans or struggling to complete work. Because each event is treated separately, the connection between them can disappear from view. This can lead to self-criticism: why can I not organise myself, why am I snapping at people, why am I so tired, why can I not cope with ordinary things? Looking for the chain reaction creates a different perspective. Instead of assuming that five separate things are failing, we can ask whether one or two pressures are travelling through several areas of life.

Sleep is a powerful first domino

Sleep is a useful example because changes in sleep can affect attention, memory, emotional regulation, appetite, motivation and tolerance for stress. A poor night does not automatically ruin the next day, and occasional disrupted sleep is part of ordinary life, but repeated disruption can create a chain of consequences. Someone may use more energy to complete normal tasks, become less able to filter distractions, make decisions more slowly and have less capacity for unexpected demands. The important point is not that sleep explains everything, but that improving one influential part of the chain can sometimes reduce pressure elsewhere without needing to tackle every difficulty separately.

Stress can travel between different parts of life

We often divide life into categories such as work, home, relationships, health and finances, but our nervous system does not necessarily keep those experiences in separate boxes. A stressful morning at work can affect how much patience is available at home. Financial worry can make sleep harder. Relationship tension can affect concentration. Sensory overload can make social communication more difficult. Caring responsibilities can reduce opportunities for recovery. When pressure travels across these boundaries, it can appear that problems are multiplying. Recognising the connections can help us decide where an interruption might have the greatest effect.

Neurodivergence and cascading demands

For neurodivergent people, chain reactions may develop around executive functioning, sensory processing, transitions, communication or the amount of effort required to manage environments designed around different needs. One unexpected change can disrupt a carefully planned sequence. Losing an item can delay leaving the house, which increases time pressure, which increases sensory and emotional load, which makes thinking harder, which makes another mistake more likely. This is not simply a matter of trying harder. Sometimes the most useful intervention is practical: preparing an item the night before, reducing decisions, using reminders, creating predictable storage, building extra transition time or asking for an adjustment that removes one domino from the chain.

Relationships can become part of the chain

Stress can also create interpersonal dominoes. When somebody is exhausted or overloaded, they may communicate more abruptly, withdraw, forget an agreement or have less capacity to listen. The other person may interpret this as lack of care, become hurt or defensive, and communication becomes more difficult. That additional tension then adds to the original stress. Understanding the chain does not remove responsibility for repairing hurt or communicating respectfully, but it can help both people look beyond the final disagreement and ask what was happening before it. Sometimes repairing the relationship includes addressing the pressure that repeatedly brings both people to the same difficult point.

Finding the domino you can stop

When many areas of life feel difficult, trying to fix everything at once can create another source of overwhelm. The Domino Effect offers a smaller question: which domino is realistically within reach? It may be protecting one evening from commitments, eating something before a demanding appointment, putting a recurring reminder in place, asking somebody to share one responsibility, preparing clothes the night before, reducing one sensory demand or having one conversation that has been repeatedly postponed. The change does not need to solve the whole problem. Its purpose is to interrupt the sequence long enough for the next event to happen differently.

Positive dominoes count too

Chain reactions are not only negative. A small supportive change can travel forward as well. Better preparation may reduce rushing. Less rushing may reduce anxiety. Lower anxiety may make communication easier. Easier communication may reduce conflict, leaving more energy for the rest of the day. One boundary can create time, time can create rest, and rest can increase the capacity to make another useful change. Positive dominoes are rarely dramatic and they do not guarantee that everything becomes easy, but they remind us that improvement does not always require one enormous transformation. Repeated small changes can alter the direction of a whole sequence.

A check-in with your own dominoes

Think about one difficulty that keeps repeating and trace backwards rather than beginning with the final event. What happened immediately before it? And what happened before that? Keep moving backwards until you find the earliest point in the chain that you can identify. Then look forward again. Which domino is outside your control, and which might be moved, supported or interrupted? You may discover that the most useful change is surprisingly small. The aim is not to control every outcome. It is to notice where a little more support, preparation, recovery or understanding could stop one problem automatically knocking into the next.

Trace your own chain reaction

What is the final problem I keep noticing?

What usually happens immediately before it?

Where did this chain really begin?

Which domino is outside my control, and which one can I influence?

What one small change could make the next domino fall differently?

A message to take with you

When everything feels connected to everything else, it is easy to believe that the only solution is to somehow repair your whole life at once. That thought alone can make starting feel impossible. You do not need to solve the entire chain today. Sometimes understanding the sequence is already a meaningful change because it replaces confusion and self-blame with information. You begin to see that the final difficulty did not appear from nowhere and that there may be earlier points where support could make a difference.

Look for the domino that is close enough to reach. It might be a practical system, a boundary, an adjustment, a conversation, a little more recovery or one expectation that can be reduced. Let that be enough for now. If it changes what happens next, even slightly, the chain has already begun to move differently. Small changes are not insignificant when they sit at an important point in the sequence.

You do not have to fix the whole line. Find the place where the pattern can change.

Space to Breathe Therapy

Support Hub resource - reflective information, not a substitute for individual medical or mental-health care.