

A GENTLE REFLECTION WORKBOOK

Reflective Writing for Stress and Burnout

A practical guide to recognising strain, protecting your capacity and finding
a way forward.

START HERE

Reflection that does not blame you for being tired

Stress can build when demands keep pressing on the time, energy, attention or support you have available. Burnout can follow prolonged strain and may involve exhaustion, distance from work or responsibilities, and feeling less able to do what is asked. These pages help you notice your experience without turning it into a personal failing.

Stress is information, not a character judgement

People can feel strained by workload, caring responsibilities, uncertainty, conflict, health concerns, financial pressure, sensory demands or several things at once. What matters is not whether somebody else would find the same situation difficult. It is how the demands are affecting you, what support you have, and what can realistically change.

Burnout is not fixed by one perfect evening

Rest and self-care can matter, but they may not be enough if the conditions creating the strain continue. This workbook includes reflection on personal choices as well as workload, expectations, resources and the support available around you. Sometimes the next step needs to involve another person or a change to the situation.

Use these pages in small pieces. You can write, type, speak, draw a simple map or choose one prompt. You do not need to complete the whole guide tonight. If you are very depleted, it may be kinder to begin with what you need in the next hour rather than reviewing everything that has gone wrong.

Start with the kind of support you need

- A pause before you reflect, or a short check-in right now.
- Help naming what is making things difficult.
- A realistic next step, boundary or request for support.
- Permission to leave some questions unanswered for now.

This workbook is for reflection and planning. It does not diagnose burnout or replace professional support. If stress is affecting your health, safety or ability to function, consider speaking with an appropriate health professional or support service.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What is using up most of my capacity at the moment?

01 | EARLY SIGNS

Notice what strain looks like for you

Stress does not show up in the same way for everyone. You might notice physical tension, faster thoughts, irritability, difficulty concentrating, avoidance, overworking, numbness or a strong wish to withdraw. Your signs may be subtle until your capacity is already low.

Map signals across the day

Think about what happens in your body, attention, emotions, behaviour and relationships. Do you stop eating regularly, lose track of time, reread the same message, snap at people, cancel plans, stay online long after work, or find small decisions unusually hard? These are examples to consider, not a checklist or proof of a diagnosis.

Notice what tends to happen first. An early signal may be easier to respond to than a late one. You might realise that you begin skipping breaks, become unusually watchful, feel dread before opening messages, or need much longer to recover after a routine demand.

What raises or lowers the pressure?

- A sudden change, unclear expectations or too many decisions.
- Long stretches without food, rest, movement or private time.
- Conflict, constant availability, or feeling unable to say no.
- A quieter space, shared task, clear plan or protected break.

Patterns can change. What helped last month may not help today, and a difficult week does not define your whole life. Try recording the conditions around a signal rather than scoring how well you coped. That can reveal whether a particular demand or missing support deserves attention.

A simple log might note the situation, what you first noticed, what you needed, and what helped even a little. Keep it brief enough to use. If tracking starts to feel like another obligation, stop or make it simpler. The purpose is to spot useful patterns, not monitor yourself perfectly.

If you notice a new, persistent or worrying physical symptom, do not assume stress is the only cause. Seek appropriate health advice.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What is one early sign I would like to take seriously, and what could I do when it appears?

02 | SOURCES AND PATTERNS

Look at the demands around you

When stress is treated as only an individual problem, the answer can become “cope better.” Reflection can also ask what is being demanded, how much control you have, what resources are available, and whether the expectations are fair or sustainable.

List the demands without judging yourself

Write down the parts of life currently drawing on you: paid work, caring, study, health, home tasks, relationships, administration, travel, sensory or social effort, and uncertainty. Include demands that are invisible to other people, such as planning, remembering, anticipating problems or recovering after a difficult interaction.

Then notice the conditions

- Volume: Is there more to do than the time and energy available?
- Control: Can I choose the order, timing or method?
- Clarity: Do I know what is expected and what “finished” means?
- Resources: Is help, equipment, training or information missing?
- Recovery: Is there any genuine time away from the demand?

You may find personal pressures, workplace or family systems, health conditions, financial constraints, discrimination or a mismatch between demands and support. Several factors can combine. Naming them does not assign blame automatically; it makes the picture more accurate.

Where change might sit

Some changes are yours to make, such as asking a question or pausing before agreeing. Some belong to a manager, organisation, family member or service. Some limits are not immediately within anyone’s control. Separate these categories so that you are not carrying responsibility for every part of the situation.

If you are responsible for other people, your own needs may have been pushed aside because somebody else’s seem more urgent. Ask what can be shared, what can be simplified, and whether there is a person or service you have not yet approached. Caring for yourself does not mean that you care less about anyone else.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Which demand is taking the most from me, and what part of it could change?

03 | CAPACITY AND LIMITS

Decide what can be reduced, shared or paused

Capacity is not endless, and it can shift with health, sleep, responsibilities, uncertainty and the effort of simply getting through the day. A plan that assumes you will always have your best energy is likely to create more pressure.

Make a capacity snapshot

Think about what is essential, what is expected but negotiable, and what you have added because you are trying to prevent disappointment or criticism. You may not be able to stop every demand. Even a small adjustment can matter: doing less of one task, asking for a deadline to move, or agreeing what can be left unfinished.

Try four practical categories

- Keep: What truly needs to happen today?
- Reduce: Can the task be smaller, simpler or “good enough”?
- Share: Who could help, take a part, or make a decision with me?
- Pause: What can wait without creating a serious problem?

Boundaries protect capacity

A boundary might be a finish time, a limit on extra tasks, a break between appointments, not answering non-urgent messages immediately, or being clear about what you cannot take on. You might need to repeat it. Another person may not like the limit; that does not automatically mean the limit is unreasonable.

If the main demands cannot be reduced, look at what support or recovery can be added and who has the power to change the conditions. You are not required to solve a structural problem through private self-discipline alone.

A request might sound like: “I can complete A or B by Friday, but not both to the expected standard. Which one takes priority?” Or: “I need a short break between these tasks so I can continue safely.” Clear limits may feel uncomfortable, especially if you fear disappointing someone. You can make the request respectfully without pretending you have unlimited capacity.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What could I reduce, share or pause this week to protect some capacity?

04 | RECOVERY

Rest matters, and so do the conditions

Rest is important, but it can be difficult to recover while demands continue unchanged. A short break may help you get through a moment; lasting relief may also require changes to workload, expectations, support, health care or the way a role is organised.

Choose recovery that is possible

Recovery may involve sleep, time without demands, supportive company, movement, quiet, creative activity, a manageable routine, practical help or professional care. Different people need different things, and the same person may need different things at different times. Avoid turning recovery into another task with a score.

A pause that actually belongs to you

If your breaks are routinely interrupted or filled with catch-up work, consider what would make them more protected. Could someone cover a task? Could a reminder help you stop? Can a meeting be moved or shortened? A pause is more restorative when the underlying demand is not simply waiting for you to return.

Watch for recovery becoming another demand

You do not have to optimise every meal, exercise session, evening routine or holiday. If self-care advice is becoming another reason to feel inadequate, reduce it to something genuinely supportive. The right first step may be ordinary and small, such as asking someone to share dinner preparation or leaving one non-urgent task for tomorrow.

When the strain is ongoing

If you have had little relief for a long time, it may help to tell someone what is happening and ask for practical support. A clinician can help consider health effects and support options; a workplace contact may need to review workload or adjustments. You do not need to wait until you collapse before your needs count.

Notice whether time away from a demand actually allows recovery. If you return to the same volume, pace or uncertainty immediately, a brief pause may only help you endure the conditions. It can still be valuable, and it may also be a sign that a broader conversation about resources, priorities or responsibilities is needed.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What kind of recovery do I need, and what is getting in its way?

05 | SELF-TALK AND RESPONSIBILITY

Respond to yourself without adding pressure

Under strain, people often use self-criticism to try to force more effort: “Stop being lazy,” “Everyone else manages,” or “I should be able to do this.” Such thoughts may increase urgency without creating the time, support or energy that is missing.

Translate the criticism into useful information

Ask what the harsh thought is worried about. “I am useless” might conceal “I am afraid of letting someone down.” “I cannot keep up” might be an accurate signal that the volume is too high. Keep the information and remove the insult. You could say, “I am worried about this task. I need to decide what can be done and what support to request.”

Accountability can stay specific

If stress has affected someone else, you can acknowledge the impact and repair your part without claiming that everything was your fault. “I missed the message and that delayed the decision. I am sorry. I can send the missing information now.” Then look at whether unclear processes or overload also need attention.

If you were treated unfairly or harmed, self-reflection should not pressure you to accept responsibility that belongs elsewhere. You can consider your response and still name what was not okay. You can decide what boundary, support or next action would make you safer.

Let the account be balanced

Try holding two truths: “I want to do this well, and I do not have the capacity for every part of it.” “I could have responded differently, and I was under sustained pressure.” A balanced account helps you learn without pretending that effort alone can change every condition.

If you choose a personal change, make it small enough to work on an ordinary day—not only when you have spare energy. A reminder, a shorter task list, a clearer stopping point or asking for help may support follow-through. The plan should fit your real circumstances rather than ask you to become endlessly resilient.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What would a fair, practical and non-punishing description of this situation sound like?

06 | ASKING FOR CHANGE

Make a clear request for support

It can be difficult to ask for help when you are used to coping alone, do not know what is reasonable, or worry about how the request will be received. A specific request can make it easier for another person to understand what change you are seeking.

Describe the effect and the needed change

You might say: “I have been working through breaks and am struggling to recover. I need us to review which tasks are most urgent and what can be reassigned.” Or: “The deadline changed, and I cannot complete the original scope safely. Can we agree the essential part and a new date for the rest?” Adapt the words to your relationship and situation.

Make the request as concrete as you can

- What is happening, and how is it affecting your work or daily life?
- What specific change, resource, boundary or decision would help?
- Who needs to be involved, and when would you like to review it?
- Would written follow-up help everyone remember what was agreed?

If you are speaking with a manager, service or family member, you can ask for a private conversation or put the issue in writing first. You can bring notes or a support person if that helps. You do not need to disclose every personal detail in order to describe a work-related or practical need.

If the first request is not heard

You may need to clarify, document what was discussed, ask who else can help, or seek advice from an appropriate representative or professional. If the situation involves health or safety concerns, use the relevant support route. Do not treat another person’s delay as evidence that your need is unimportant.

Before a meeting, you could write down the effect of the current arrangement, one or two changes you want to discuss, and a date to review whether they helped. If decisions are made verbally, a brief written summary can make next steps clearer. Ask for support with this preparation if doing it alone is part of the strain.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What is one specific change I would like to ask for, and who could help me ask?

07 | A FLEXIBLE TOOL

A stress and capacity reflection

Use these questions in any order. You can review one moment, one week or one recurring pressure. Leave anything unanswered if you do not have the information or capacity today.

1. Name the strain

What demand, event or combination of pressures is most present?

2. Notice the signal

What do I notice in my body, attention, emotions, behaviour or relationships?

3. Look at the conditions

What is being asked of me? What support, control, time or recovery do I have?

4. Choose a fair next step

Could something be reduced, shared, delayed, clarified or changed?

5. Ask for help if needed

Who could help, and what would I like them to do?

6. Protect recovery

What is one realistic way to create a little space today or tomorrow?

A worked example

“I am staying late to finish several tasks and still feel behind. I am tense and forgetting small details. The requests have grown, and I have not checked which ones are essential. Tomorrow I can ask my manager to help prioritise and agree what moves to next week. Tonight I will stop at the time I planned and leave the list ready for the morning.”

The example does not promise that one conversation will fix every pressure. It identifies a signal, a condition, a request and one limit that can be tried.

A closing thought

You are allowed to take strain seriously before you reach your limit. Support, changed expectations and recovery are part of a sustainable way forward.

Take one sentence with you

- My capacity is information, not a moral score.
- I can ask what is essential and what can change.
- Rest does not have to be earned through exhaustion.
- I can take one practical step and seek support.

If stress or burnout is affecting your health, safety or ability to cope, speak with someone you trust and seek appropriate professional support. Space to Breathe Therapy can also be contacted to ask whether its support is right for you.