THE DOMINO EFFECT

When one small thing knocks into everything else

The central idea: Sometimes you do not have to fix every domino. You just need to find the one you can stop.

Why one difficulty can become five

Life rarely keeps difficulties in separate compartments. A disturbed night can make it harder to focus. Reduced focus can make ordinary tasks take longer. Falling behind can increase pressure at work, and that pressure can travel home as irritability, withdrawal or exhaustion. Worry about what happened can then make the next night harder.

When the chain is already moving, we often notice the last domino: an argument, a missed deadline, or feeling overwhelmed. That does not mean the last event is the whole problem. It may be the visible end of a longer sequence.

A possible chain

1. Sleep Rest is disrupted	2. Focus Tasks take more effort	3. Work Pressure builds	4. Home Patience runs low

The arrows between these stages are not inevitable. A difficult night does not guarantee a difficult day, and the same experience affects people differently. The diagram helps us look for connections rather than assign blame.

Why this can matter for men

Some men have learned to minimise distress, keep working, avoid asking for help or treat irritability as a personal failing. Others may be dealing with expectations to be dependable, financially secure or emotionally self-contained. These pressures can make the early signs of overload harder to recognise.

A domino-effect perspective asks a more useful question than “What is wrong with me?”: “What has been happening around me, and where might this pattern begin?”

HOW PRESSURE TRAVELS

Work, home, relationships and wellbeing

The spillover effect

Stress can cross boundaries between settings. At work, a person might push through noise, social demands or a heavy workload. At home, the effort of holding everything together may become visible as silence, frustration, fatigue or a need to be alone. Loved ones may see the response without seeing what preceded it.

Four areas to notice

Work: deadlines, unpredictable demands, financial pressure, lack of adjustments, conflict or an inability to switch off.

Home: chores, caring responsibilities, limited recovery time, competing needs and the feeling that there is always something unfinished.

Relationships: less capacity to listen, reduced affection, short responses, withdrawal, misunderstandings and guilt after difficult interactions.

Wellbeing: sleep changes, tension, sensory fatigue, reduced concentration, worry, low mood and a shrinking sense of control.

> Important distinction: Recognising the chain can help explain behaviour, but it does not excuse hurtful behaviour. Understanding what contributed to a reaction can support accountability, repair and change.

A cycle can loop back on itself

Demand Extra pressure	Response Less capacity	Impact A difficult moment	Worry Anticipating tomorrow

The final worry may increase vigilance and make rest harder, starting the cycle again. Identifying a loop is useful because there may be more than one place to interrupt it.

A different way to talk about it

Instead of “I am angry for no reason,” someone might say: “I have been overloaded all day. I need twenty minutes to settle, and then I want to talk.” Instead of “I always mess up,” try: “When I sleep badly, I need more support with planning the next day.”

NEURODIVERGENCE & CASCADING PRESSURE

Executive functioning, sensory demands and hidden effort

For some autistic and ADHD people, ordinary environments can create repeated demands on attention, planning, regulation and sensory processing. These demands may accumulate before anyone else notices. Experiences vary widely: neurodivergence does not mean a person will always experience these chains.

Executive-functioning chains

An unexpected change can interrupt a planned sequence. Restarting may require additional effort. That effort can delay other tasks, which increases time pressure. Time pressure can then make initiation, working memory or decision-making even harder.

Change Plan interrupted	Restart Extra mental effort	Delay Tasks accumulate	Overload More decisions

Sensory chains

Noise, lighting, crowds, clothing discomfort, travel or sustained social interaction may increase sensory load. Someone may appear to cope well in public and then have very little capacity left for conversation or practical tasks later.

Masking and the delayed cost

Consciously managing facial expressions, responses, movement or communication can require energy. The effect may appear later as fatigue, withdrawal, difficulty making decisions or a strong need for predictable quiet time. These responses should be understood in context rather than interpreted automatically as disinterest.

Support that changes the sequence

Reduce switching: group similar tasks, use a written transition note or protect time to finish one task before starting another.

Externalise memory: use visible checklists, reminders, shared calendars or simple step-by-step systems.

Lower sensory load: provide a quieter space, appropriate breaks, predictable information or equipment adjustments.

Make expectations explicit: clarify priorities, deadlines and what “good enough” looks like.

Key reflection: If a person appears to struggle with the final task, look at the demands that came before it. Support at the beginning of the chain may be more effective than criticism at the end.

POSITIVE DOMINOES

Small changes can create wider benefits

The domino effect is not only about difficulties. One manageable change may make the next part of the day easier. A realistic adjustment can reduce pressure without demanding that someone solve every part of their life at once.

Five possible starting points

1. A boundary: finishing work messages at an agreed time may protect a period of recovery and make evenings less pressured.

2. A practical system: preparing tomorrow’s essentials in one place may reduce morning decisions and the risk of running late.

3. An adjustment: written instructions, flexible start times or a quieter workspace may lower repeated demands.

4. A conversation: telling a partner or colleague what overload looks like can reduce misunderstandings and make it easier to agree on support.

5. Recovery: a short, protected break between work and home may create space to regulate before moving into another role.

One small change, several possible effects

Protected break Time to decompress	More capacity Less immediate strain	Clearer response Easier communication	Better evening More room for rest

These are possibilities, not guarantees. A strategy is useful only if it fits the person’s circumstances, resources and needs. Some dominoes are outside personal control, including unsafe work environments, financial hardship or inaccessible services. Support and structural change may be needed.

Choose the earliest realistic interruption

The first domino is not always available to change. If a job is unpredictable, you might not be able to remove the demand. You may still be able to ask for clearer priorities, schedule a transition break, seek an adjustment or agree on a simple way to communicate when capacity is low.

> A kinder goal: Do not ask, “How can I become a person who never struggles?” Ask, “What would make the next domino a little less likely to fall?”

MY DOMINO MAP

A guided reflection worksheet

Choose one repeating situation. There is no need to complete every question in one sitting. Write a few words, draw arrows or talk it through with someone you trust.

1. What is the final domino I usually notice? (For example, an argument, shutdown, missed task or restless night.)

2. What happened immediately before it?

3. Looking further back, what earlier demand or difficulty might have started the chain?

4. What did I need at that earlier point?

5. Which parts are within my influence, and which need support or changes from others?

INTERRUPTING THE PATTERN

Turn insight into one manageable experiment

6. What is one realistic point where I could interrupt the chain?

7. What is the smallest action I could try this week?

My one-domino plan

When I notice: _____

I will try: _____

Support I may need: _____

How I will know it helped: _____

Review without judging yourself

After trying the change, ask: Did the chain slow down? Did anything feel easier? Was the change realistic? What was outside my control? If it did not work, that is information, not failure. Try a different point in the chain or seek additional support.

Remember: Sometimes you do not have to fix every domino. You just need to find the one you can stop.

This resource is for reflection and psychoeducation. It is not a diagnostic tool or a substitute for individual professional support. If difficulties are persistent or significantly affecting everyday life, consider speaking with a qualified professional.