

Circles of control

Finding where your energy can make a difference

When life feels uncertain or overwhelming, it can be hard to separate what we can act on from what we wish we could change. We may find ourselves replaying conversations, anticipating outcomes or feeling responsible for keeping everything together.

A little clarity can create some room

The circles of control and influence offer a way to sort what is weighing on us. They invite us to notice where we have choices, where we can contribute, and where an outcome is beyond us. This can help us choose a manageable next step and recognise where we need support.

Three questions to come back to

What can I choose or do? My available actions and next steps.

What can I influence? Things my efforts may shape, without guaranteeing the result.

What is beyond my control? Things that matter to me but are not mine to determine.

Your feelings still belong here

Thoughts, feelings and automatic stress responses are not switches we can simply turn off. We can practise noticing them and, with time and support, build more choice in how we respond. Our options also depend on our circumstances, safety, resources and capacity.

You can care without carrying it all.

Something can be outside your control and still deserve grief, anger or concern. Acknowledging a limit does not mean approving of what happened, giving up, or accepting harmful treatment.

Start with one situation. There is no need to sort your whole life at once. The next pages offer examples and space to explore what feels possible today.

Adapted from the circles of concern and influence framework associated with Stephen R. Covey. See also: Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Reconnecting Toolkit.

Understanding the circles

A map for choices, influence and uncertainty

The outer circle holds our concerns. Within it are things we can influence, and within those, actions we can choose. The examples below show different parts of that map.



Control

The next step I can take

For example: prepare what I want to say, make a request, or take a pause.

Influence

My contribution matters

For example: listen, practise a skill, or seek care. Other factors affect the outcome.

Beyond control

The outcome is not mine to decide

For example: whether someone agrees, what has already happened, or the weather.

The same situation may belong in all three circles. I can make a request, influence a conversation, and still be unable to choose the other person's response.

What is mine to carry?

A personal reflection, one situation at a time

Choose something that is taking up space in your mind. Break it into smaller parts and place each part where it fits today. There are no perfect answers.

The situation on my mind:

1. What is within my control?

Which action or choice is realistically available to me?

2. What can I influence?

What could I contribute, while allowing room for uncertainty?

3. What is beyond my control?

What outcome, response or past event cannot be decided by me?

One small next step, with the capacity I have:

Support or care I need for what remains uncertain:

You do not have to resolve every feeling to take one kind step.

You can return to this later. If there is no useful action available now, rest, support or simply acknowledging that this is hard can also matter.