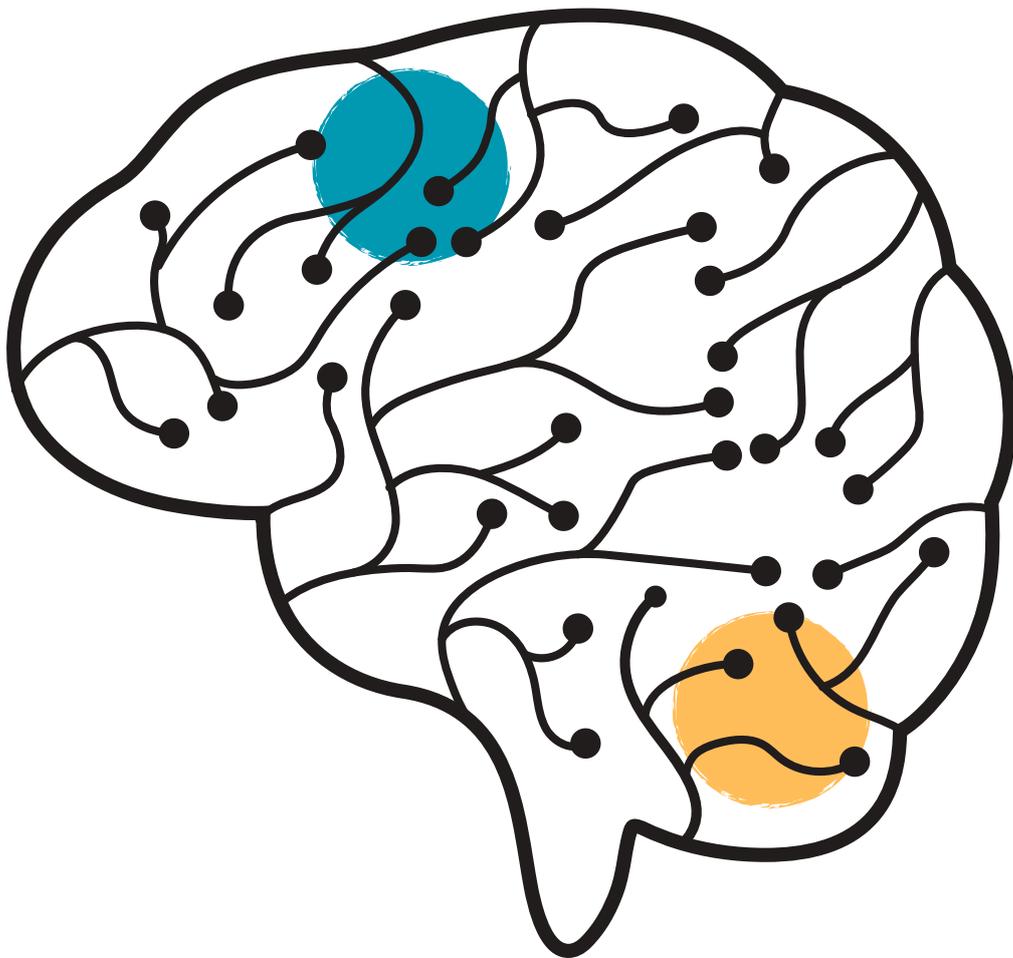


UNTANGLING THE SHOULD

HOW BORROWED EXPECTATIONS QUIETLY SHAPE
YOUR HABITS, GOALS, AND STRESS



SHOULD-ING: FROM PRESSURE TO POSSIBILITY

Most “shoulds” don’t start inside us.

They are absorbed over time from culture, family, work, productivity norms, and unspoken expectations about what a “good” or “successful” life looks like.

Eventually, those external pressures turn into an internal voice that sounds like our own.

- “I should be more productive.”
- “I should want this.”
- “I should be further along by now.”

When habits feel heavy or goals create pressure instead of direction, it’s often not a motivation problem. It’s a **misalignment problem**.

Many people are trying to build their lives inside systems that don’t fit their values, energy, or idea of a good life.

This workbook is not about silencing responsibility or avoiding effort. It’s about **reclaiming authorship**.

Before we design habits, set goals, or try to change behavior, we need to understand which expectations we’re actually choosing and which ones we’re carrying by default.

“Should-ing” is how misaligned systems live on inside us.

By making those “shoulds” visible, we can:

- separate responsibility from pressure
- distinguish values from conditioning
- stop optimizing ourselves for lives we don’t believe in

This exercise invites you to slow down and look honestly at the expectations shaping your decisions.

Not to reject everything.
But to **choose consciously**.

Instead of asking, *“What should I do?”*
we begin asking, *“What could I choose, and why?”*

That question is where real change starts.



STEP-BY-STEP REFLECTION

Step 1: Notice Your "Shoulds"

Write down 3–5 common "should" statements you often say or think. Don't filter or judge, just let them flow.

Examples:

- "I should eat healthier."
- "I should be more productive."
- "I should say yes to family more often."

Your Turn:

I should _____

Step 2: What's Behind the "Should"?

For each statement, explore:

- Where does this belief come from?
- Whose voice might it reflect? (Family? Society? Your inner critic?)
- How does it make you feel when you say it?

Example:

"I should be more productive."

→ This comes from comparing myself to others. It feels like pressure and not enoughness.

Your Turn (Pick 1–2 to go deeper):

I should _____

→ This belief comes from _____

→ When I think this, I feel _____

I should _____

→ This belief comes from _____

→ When I think this, I feel _____

Step 3: Shift to “Could”

From Guilt to Choice

Why “Should” Can Weigh You Down

The word “should” is subtle but powerful. It often carries a message that we’re not doing enough, not good enough, or that we’re failing to meet expectations. It creates pressure by implying a moral obligation or external rule, rather than inner desire or conscious choice.

When you say “I should,” you may unconsciously be telling yourself:

- “I’m not okay as I am.”
- “I’m disappointing someone (or myself).”
- “There’s a rule I must follow, even if it doesn’t fit me.”

Over time, these messages can chip away at your confidence and autonomy. “Should” statements often come from:

- Cultural or family conditioning (e.g. “I should always put others first.”)
- Inner critics or perfectionism
- Social comparison or trying to match someone else’s path

You might even notice that “should” leads to resistance rather than action. It triggers guilt, not motivation. And guilt is rarely a sustainable foundation for meaningful change.

Why “Could” is a Liberating Shift

Replacing should with could transforms the conversation.

- “Should” is demanding → “Could” is empowering
- “Should” implies no choice → “Could” reminds you of your agency
- “Should” is rooted in judgment → “Could” invites curiosity and compassion

When you say “I could,” you're recognizing:

- That you have options
- That your choices matter
- That you can align actions with your values and wellbeing

This shift doesn't mean you'll never take responsible or productive action. It means that when you do, it's coming from a place of clarity and choice, not guilt or fear.

Try the Shift

Take one of your “should” statements and rewrite it with “could”. Instead of “I should...” say “If I really wanted to, I could...”

Example:

“I should call my friend back.”

→ “I could call my friend back.”

Ask yourself:

- Do I want to?
- Why would this feel meaningful or kind—for me or for them?
- What feels right in this moment?

Your Turn (use this format for each one you want to explore):

I should _____

I could _____

- Do I want to? Why or why not?
- What feels more true or aligned for me now?

I should _____

I could _____

- Do I want to? Why or why not?
- What feels more true or aligned for me now?

I should _____

I could _____

- Do I want to? Why or why not?
- What feels more true or aligned for me now?

I should _____

I could _____

- Do I want to? Why or why not?
- What feels more true or aligned for me now?

I should _____

I could _____

- Do I want to? Why or why not?
- What feels more true or aligned for me now?

Step 4: Choose with Intention

Cross out all the should that you don't want to do. From your list of remaining "coulds," choose one that you genuinely want to act on. Then, create a small, self-compassionate step toward it.

Example:

"I could move my body more."

→ "Yes, I want to feel more energized."

Small step: I'll take a 10-minute walk in the morning to start gently.

Your Turn:

I could _____

Yes, I want to because _____

My next small step is _____

OPTIONAL: REMINDERS OF CONSCIOUS CHOICE

These statements are not meant to replace reflection, responsibility, or action.

They're simple reminders you can return to when old patterns of pressure or obligation show up.

Use them as anchors for conscious choice, not as something to convince yourself of.

If none of these feel true, don't force them. That information matters.

Choose one or create your own:

- "I am free to choose what nourishes me."
- "I release guilt and return to my truth."
- "I choose deliberately, even when it's uncomfortable."
- "I could... and I choose what aligns with me."

Write your favorite here:

CLOSING – FROM AWARENESS TO CHOICE

If you've completed this exercise, you may have noticed something important:

Not every *"should"* deserves your energy.

Some expectations reflect values you genuinely care about. Others are simply habits of pressure you've been living inside for too long.

This work is not about doing less or avoiding responsibility. It's about **choosing responsibility instead of living on autopilot.**

When you reduce *"should-ing,"* you don't lose direction. You gain clarity.

From here, the question is not *"What should I fix next?"*

It's:

What kind of person am I willing to be, even when the world pushes differently?

That answer becomes a design constraint. It shapes the habits you build, the boundaries you set, and the systems you create around yourself.

CLOSING – FROM AWARENESS TO CHOICE

You don't need to redesign your whole life at once.
You need a starting point.

One small area where your choices make sense.
One place where pressure is replaced by intention.

That's how change becomes sustainable.
And that's how people begin building lives that still make sense when the world doesn't.

Next reflection

Now that you've identified which "shoulds" aren't yours,
what are you willing to stand for instead?

