FREE WORKBOOK

# The Self-Imposed Rules
## *Behind Your Stress and Self-Criticism*

Uncover the invisible "shoulds" shaping your decisions, guilt, and pressure, and begin to loosen their grip.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Most stress does not come from reality itself. It comes from invisible internal rules we carry without ever questioning them. Rules like:

- *"I should always handle things alone."*
- *"I should not disappoint people."*
- *"I must stay composed."*

This exercise reveals the hidden rules shaping your decisions, guilt, and pressure, so you can choose which ones still serve you.

✦ **How to use this workbook:** Move through each step in order. You can print this page and write by hand. Take your time. This is reflection work, not a test.

## 1 Catch a Recent Emotional Spike

Think of a recent moment where you felt one of the following:

- **Unreasonably guilty**
- **Irritated but silent**
- **Pressured without being asked**
- **Disappointed in yourself**

A small, ordinary moment works well. The goal is to find a reaction that felt slightly disproportionate.

DESCRIBE THE SITUATION BRIEFLY

WHAT DID YOU FEEL?

## 2 Reveal the Hidden Rule

Complete the sentence below **quickly**, without overthinking. Let the first honest answer surface:

> *"Part of me believes I should have _____."*

Examples others have found:

- *"...handled it perfectly"*
- *"...been more productive"*
- *"...not needed help"*
- *"...kept my emotions to myself"*

YOUR SENTENCE

*This sentence is your hidden rule. It is the lens through which you judged the situation.*

## 3 Trace the Origin

Rules do not appear from nowhere. Most were learned from family, culture, early experiences, or environments where following the rule felt necessary for safety or belonging.

- ? Where did I learn this rule? Who taught it to me, directly or indirectly?
- ? Who benefits when I follow this rule? Is it still me?
- ? What emotion appears if I break it? (Guilt? Shame? Fear? Anxiety?)

YOUR REFLECTIONS

## 4 Measure the Cost

Every internal rule has a function, and a cost. Many rules that were once protective have become a source of pressure rather than safety.

- ? Does this rule reduce my anxiety long-term, or increase it?
- ? Does it make me more authentic, or more performative?
- ? Does it protect my *values*, or my *image*?

WHAT IS THIS RULE COSTING YOU?

**Note:** Many rules protect image, not values. If a rule primarily protects how others see you rather than what you actually care about, that is important information.

## 5 Reality-Test the Rule

Rewrite the rule in a more realistic, flexible form. The goal is not to abandon the value inside it, but to remove the rigid, all-or-nothing demand.

| OLD RULE | REVISED RULE |
| --- | --- |
| *"I should always stay composed."* | *"I value composure, but emotional honesty is sometimes more appropriate."* |

The revised rule keeps the underlying value while releasing the demand for perfection.

YOUR OLD RULE (FROM STEP 2)

YOUR REVISED RULE

## 6 Spot Recurring Rules

One rule is a clue, a pattern is a map. If you notice certain themes across different situations, pay attention.

Common recurring themes:

- **Over-responsibility**
- **Emotional self-containment**
- **Fear of inconvenience**
- **Need to appear competent**
- **Cannot ask for help**
- **Must always be "fine"**

DO ANY THEMES REPEAT FOR YOU? WHICH ONES?

WHERE DOES THIS THEME SHOW UP MOST IN YOUR LIFE?

## 7 Choose One Rule to Soften

Not eliminate, **soften**. That distinction matters. Eliminating a rule can create a backlash. Softening it creates space for choice.

> *"This week, I will notice when this rule activates, and pause before obeying it automatically."*

Awareness alone often reduces a rule's control. You do not have to act differently right away. Just notice.

*Your intention for this week*

**THE RULE I AM CHOOSING TO SOFTEN**

**HOW I WILL RECOGNIZE IT WHEN IT ACTIVATES**

**WHAT I WILL DO INSTEAD OF AUTOMATICALLY OBEYING IT**

WHAT YOU HAVE JUST DONE

## You Have Completed Your Audit

◎ Surfaced hidden "shoulds" you may never have consciously named before

◈ Gained clarity on where your self-imposed pressure actually comes from

◇ Started building a more flexible, self-aligned internal framework

*This exercise pairs especially well with values work, because it shows why we sometimes act against our own values even when we know what they are. The rules get in the way. Once we see the rules, we can start to choose differently.*