

# What's Yours to Carry:

## A SoLead Coaching Guide

If you've ever sat with a client who is capable, thoughtful, deeply committed, and quietly unraveling under the weight of everything they feel responsible for, this guide is for you.

This resource is built around a simple visual exercise that helps people distinguish between what concerns them and what is actually theirs to carry.

Most clients who struggle with overwhelm are not disorganized or overcommitted. Many are carrying emotional responsibility for systems, people, outcomes, and problems that no one person could realistically hold alone. Over time, that burden starts to feel moral, necessary, and even virtuous.

Eventually, caring and carrying become indistinguishable.

This guide is designed to help coaches work skillfully with that dynamic, not by teaching detachment or minimizing real systemic pressures, and certainly not by coaching people into smaller lives. The goal is to help clients reconnect with discernment, agency, shared responsibility, and sustainable leadership.

## How to Use This Guide

This resource was designed for coaches working with:

- leaders
- educators
- nonprofit professionals
- advocates and organizers
- executives
- caregivers
- founders
- highly responsible humans who have quietly become the emotional infrastructure for everyone around them

You do not need to use every section. Some coaches might primarily use the circles exercise itself, while others may draw from the deeper coaching questions, organizational applications, or facilitator observations. Think of this as a field guide rather than a script.

# The Coaching Foundation

The circles exercise works because it interrupts a pattern that many high-capacity people live inside without fully seeing: They become emotionally fused with problems they cannot individually solve.

This may happen because they care deeply, have been rewarded for over-functioning, or grew up in systems where being useful was tied to safety, belonging, or worth.

<b>Pattern</b>	<b>What It Often Looks Like in Coaching</b>
Responsibility expands beyond realistic authority	"I can't step back because everything depends on me."
Exhaustion becomes normalized	The client describes severe depletion as if it were ordinary professionalism
Identity fuses with usefulness	Rest starts feeling irresponsible instead of restorative
Attention becomes scattered and diffuse	Everything feels urgent and emotionally charged
Leadership becomes reactive instead of intentional	The client spends most of their energy responding instead of choosing

Eventually, clients lose contact with the difference between:

- caring and carrying
- participation and personal responsibility
- influence and control
- commitment and self-erasure

The circles exercise restores that distinction visually. Once people can see the distinction clearly, they often begin making different choices naturally.

# Before You Facilitate This Exercise

This tool works best when the coach is grounded. Clients do not need you to rush them toward insight. They need enough spaciousness to notice themselves honestly. That means your role is not to:

- convince them to care less
- instruct them about boundaries
- prematurely reassure them
- immediately convert everything into action steps

Your role is to help them stay in contact with what is true, which may include:

- the exhaustion
- the grief
- the moral urgency
- the over-responsibility
- the fear underneath letting go
- the places where they still have meaningful agency

In this exercise, as in coaching in general, the quality of your presence matters more than perfect facilitation.

## Circles Exercise Session Overview (45-50 min)

Phase	Purpose	Approx. Time
Opening the conversation - Step 1	Surface the pattern gently	5 min
Drawing the circles - Step 2	Externalize concerns and influence	10-15 min
Reflection and noticing - Steps 3 & 4	Help insight deepen organically	10 min
Oxygen question - Step 5	Reconnect with sustainable agency	10 min
Commitment and integration - Step 6	Translate insight into lived practice	5 min
Closing reflection - Step 7	Reconnect leadership with humanity	5 min

# 1. Opening the Conversation

Start by reflecting what you are noticing. You might say:

“You’re carrying a tremendous amount right now, and much of it sounds genuinely important to you. I’m also noticing how much personal responsibility you seem to be holding for things that may extend beyond one person’s actual capacity. I’d love to try an exercise that sometimes helps people separate what concerns them from what is actually theirs to influence directly.”

If the client becomes defensive, resist the temptation to argue them out of it. Instead, see it as data. Become curious. Acknowledge and affirm: “Of course this matters deeply to you.” Or: “I can hear how much you care about this.”

That keeps the client connected to themselves instead of pushing them into justification.

## What the Coach May Notice Early

You May Notice...	Stay Curious About...
The client casually describes extreme exhaustion	Why burnout may have become so normalized that they don't recognize it as unsustainable
They repeatedly say “I should,” “I have to,” or “Someone needs to...”	How their sense of responsibility may be fused with their identity, morality, or self-worth
They describe themselves as the only competent or reliable person	Whether they may have spent years compensating for broken systems and being rewarded for it
Their speech speeds up around particular topics	What that shift might mean
Slowing down creates visible discomfort	How stillness may bring them into contact with feelings they have been outrunning
They keep describing collective problems in intensely personal terms	Whether the client may be carrying communal or organizational anxiety inside their own body

## Common Coaching Trap

Do not rush too quickly toward “healthy boundaries.” If the client feels unseen in the depth of what they are carrying, boundary language can land as dismissive rather than supportive.

People are far more willing to loosen over-responsibility once they feel deeply understood inside it.

## 2. Drawing the Circles

Ask the client to draw two circles, one inside the other. Introduce the outer circle first.

### Outer Circle: Concern

“In the outer circle, write down everything currently taking up emotional or mental space for you. Don’t organize it. Don’t edit it. Just capture what feels heavy, unresolved, urgent, emotionally consuming, or demanding.”

Then give them quiet time.

**Do not interrupt too quickly.** Sometimes clients need a moment to process or simply to realize how much they are carrying simultaneously.

As they write, pay attention to:

- whether the page fills rapidly
- whether the concerns center mostly on other people
- whether systemic issues dominate the list
- whether the client becomes emotional, agitated, flat, or relieved
- whether they seem surprised by the sheer volume themselves

Then move to the inner circle.

### Inner Circle: Influence

“Now look at everything in the outer circle and identify what you can directly shape, influence, decide, or act on yourself. Not what you wish would change. Not what depends on everyone else cooperating. Only what is realistically within your influence.”

This is often the emotional turning point. Clients frequently want to place large systemic problems in the center because emotionally they feel responsible for them.

Stay compassionate, but stay clear. Helpful questions at this stage might be:

- “Can you directly change that?”
- “What part of this actually belongs to you?”
- “Where do you genuinely have leverage?”
- “Does this outcome depend on other people making different choices?”
- “What is your actual role here?”

The goal is discernment, not detachment.

## **Helpful Coaching Moves During the Exercise**

<b>What's Emerging</b>	<b>Helpful Coaching Move</b>
The client insists everything belongs in the inner circle	Explore what feels emotionally dangerous about releasing responsibility
The client becomes visibly emotional	Slow down instead of redirecting or fixing
The client keeps collapsing systemic problems into personal responsibility	Clarify the difference between participation and sole responsibility
The client minimizes the weight of what they are carrying	Mirror back the accumulation gently and concretely
The client becomes abstract or intellectualized	Bring them back into lived experience and embodied noticing

## **3. Let the Visual Land**

Once the circles are complete, ask the client to shade the inner circle. Then pause. Do not rush to interpretation. The visual contrast often creates insight faster than explanation does.

Some clients immediately exhale. Others become sad. Some may feel briefly disoriented.

All of that makes sense.

## **What May Be Happening Beneath the Reaction**

When clients realize how much sits outside their actual control, they are often confronting more than limitation. They may also be confronting:

- grief about systems larger than any one person
- fear that things will collapse without them

- uncertainty about who they are without over-functioning
- exhaustion they have not fully allowed themselves to feel
- the realization that they have been carrying communal anxiety alone for a very long time

Often the client is not grieving the smaller inner circle itself but the fantasy that they could personally hold everything together. That grief deserves room.

## 4. Reflection and Meaning-Making

This stage works best when the coach becomes less directive: You are not trying to explain the exercise; you're helping the client hear themselves more clearly.

Reflection Question	What the Question Opens
"What stands out to you?"	Self-generated insight
"What feels different seeing this visually?"	Movement from abstraction into reality
"What surprised you about what landed outside the center?"	Awareness of inflated responsibility
"What happens in your body looking at this?"	Embodied awareness
"What would shift if you focused primarily on the inner circle for one week?"	Experimentation instead of perfection
"What feels hardest to leave outside the center?"	Identity, grief, fear, or moral pressure

### Listen for Emotional Logic

Clients are not holding on to responsibility because they believe they are omnipotent. They may be defending it because underneath the responsibility lives something they deeply value:

- love
- fear
- guilt
- loyalty
- survival
- belonging
- identity

- morality

The coaching may become much more effective once you stop treating over-responsibility as merely cognitive.

## 5. The Oxygen Question

Once the client has more clarity, shift toward agency and restoration. Ask:

“Looking at what’s actually inside your influence circle, what would feel like oxygen this week?”

The word **oxygen** matters. It changes the emotional orientation of the conversation.

Clients in chronic overwhelm may often default toward another productivity goal. We can support them in moving instead toward something:

- concrete
- restorative
- breathable
- emotionally regulating
- realistically possible

### What Makes an Effective Oxygen Action

Less Helpful	More Helpful
Broad intentions	Specific actions
More self-improvement	More support and breathing room
Actions dependent on others changing	Self-directed choices
Abstract aspirations	Observable behaviors
More productivity	More steadiness and aliveness

#### Examples

Instead of...	Try...
“Set better boundaries”	“No email after 7 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday”
“Take care of myself”	“Sit outside for 15 minutes before opening my laptop”

"Delegate more"	"Hand off the report without rechecking it repeatedly"
"Be less stressed"	"Take a real lunch break three times this week"

## Another Common Trap

Clients in burnout frequently assume meaningful change must be dramatic.; however, nervous systems do not usually rebuild through dramatic gestures but through repeated experiences of:

- safety
- agency
- rest
- clarity
- permission
- support
- small sustainable choices

Do not underestimate the significance of a tiny shift that the client can actually sustain.

## 6. Commitment and Integration

Before ending the session, help the client anchor the insight in lived reality. Helpful prompts may be:

- "What are you more aware of now than you were at the beginning of our session today?"
- "What tiny experiment might you try in order to test this insight?"
- "What might interfere?"
- "What support would help?"
- "How do you want to remember this during the week?"

Keep the focus on connection rather than performance This is not about extracting accountability but rather about helping the client remain connected to themselves once the coaching session ends.

## 7. Closing the Session

Bring the conversation back to leadership. You might say:

"Focusing on your actual sphere of influence does not make you less committed. It often makes your leadership steadier, clearer, and more sustainable because you stop spending energy trying to personally hold together systems larger than yourself."

Or:

“You do not have to disappear in order to contribute meaningfully.”

That idea tends to stay with people, especially because many clients have spent years believing the opposite.

# Deepening the Work: Coaching Questions

## On Responsibility

- “Where did you learn that this was yours to carry?”
- “What feels at stake if you loosen your grip on this?”
- “Who benefits when you absorb responsibility this way?”
- “What would happen if responsibility here became more shared?”

## On Identity

- “Who are you when you are not rescuing, fixing, or holding everything together?”
- “What parts of yourself have disappeared inside this role?”
- “What becomes possible when usefulness is not your only source of worth?”

## On Systems

- “What belongs to the system that you have been carrying personally?”
- “What is your role inside this ecosystem?”
- “Where do you genuinely have leverage?”

## On Burnout

- “What has the cost of carrying all of this been?”
- “Who loses access to you when you are this depleted?”
- “What parts of your leadership disappear when exhaustion becomes chronic?”

## On Grief

- “What might need to be mourned here?”
- “What reality have you been trying not to fully feel?”
- “What becomes possible once you stop pretending you can hold all of this alone?”

## Closing Thoughts for Coaches

This work is powerful because it gives people permission to be human while staying committed to their values. You're not asking them to care less. You're asking them to care *strategically*, from a place of presence instead of panic.

When people can see their sphere of influence clearly and make one small choice from that place, something fundamental may start to shift. They may feel more powerful (not less), more connected to their values, and more able to actually contribute.

That's the work. Everything else follows.

## Questions?

This guide is a living thing. If a question comes up that this doesn't answer, or if you try something and it shifts something, we'd love to hear.

We're building this practice with you.

In partnership,  
Glori & Cris



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