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The 12 Spoon Theory: Understanding Energy, Capacity & Nervous System Support

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Some Days, Everything Costs More Energy

Have you ever noticed that there are days when even simple tasks feel heavier than usual?

Answering emails. Getting dressed. Driving to work. Making dinner. Holding conversations. Managing responsibilities.

For many individuals navigating chronic stress, caregiving, illness, burnout, grief, nervous system overload, or emotional exhaustion, daily life can quietly become an exercise in energy management.

This is where the concept of Spoon Theory can be incredibly helpful.

Originally created by Christine Miserandino to help explain life with chronic illness, Spoon Theory has become a powerful framework for understanding energy, emotional capacity, and nervous system depletion.

While everyone technically has “energy,” not everyone begins the day with the same amount available.

And perhaps more importantly:

Not every task costs the same amount of energy for every person.



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What Is Spoon Theory?

Spoon Theory uses spoons as a visual representation of physical, emotional, and mental energy.

Imagine beginning the day with 12 spoons.

Every activity throughout the day “costs” spoons.

For someone navigating chronic stress, caregiving, illness, nervous system dysregulation, or burnout, the spoons can disappear quickly.

And unlike a phone battery, the nervous system does not instantly recharge overnight.

Some days, a person may wake up with:

- 12 spoons
- 8 spoons
- or even 4 spoons

Depending on:

- sleep quality
- inflammation
- stress levels
- emotional strain
- overstimulation
- hormones
- caregiving responsibilities
- chronic illness
- grief
- mental load
- environmental overwhelm



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Understanding this framework can help reduce shame and increase self-awareness.

Because often, people are not “lazy.”

They are depleted.

A Simple Example of the 12 Spoon Theory

Below is an example of how spoons may be used throughout the day:

Activity	Spoon Cost
Getting ready for the day	2 spoons
Driving in traffic	1 spoon
A stressful work meeting	2 spoons
Managing caregiving responsibilities	3 spoons
Grocery shopping in an overstimulating environment	2 spoons
Cooking dinner	1 spoon
Emotional conflict or difficult conversations	2 spoons

Suddenly, the day is already overdrawn.

And yet many people continue trying to function as though they still have full capacity.

This is often where burnout deepens.



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Why Spoon Theory Matters for Nervous System Health

One of the most important things Spoon Theory teaches us is this:

Capacity matters.

Modern culture often celebrates constant productivity, pushing through exhaustion, and ignoring the body's signals.

But the nervous system keeps score.

When we consistently operate beyond our emotional, physical, or energetic capacity, the body can begin to shift into:

- chronic stress
- emotional exhaustion
- irritability
- shutdown
- anxiety
- sleep disruption
- overwhelm
- brain fog
- inflammation
- burnout

For many individuals, especially caregivers and high-achieving professionals, there can also be guilt around slowing down.

Yet honoring our capacity is not weakness.

It is wisdom.



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Spoon Theory & Emotional Wellbeing

Spoon depletion is not only physical.

Emotional experiences also require energy.

Things like:

- difficult conversations
- caregiving stress
- emotional labor
- decision fatigue
- conflict
- people pleasing
- overcommitting
- excessive screen time
- overstimulating environments

can quietly drain the nervous system.

Many individuals are carrying invisible emotional workloads that others cannot see.

This is one reason why self-compassion and emotional awareness are so important.

Sometimes exhaustion is not about doing “too little.”

Sometimes it is the result of carrying too much for too long.



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The Environment Also Affects Our Spoons

One area that is often overlooked in wellness conversations is the role our environment plays in our nervous system.

Our homes and workspaces can either:

- support restoration OR
- contribute to depletion.

Things that may quietly drain energy include:

- clutter
- harsh lighting
- constant noise
- overstimulation
- visual chaos
- lack of restorative spaces
- excessive screen exposure
- poor sleep environments

On the other hand, supportive environments can help the nervous system feel calmer and safer.

Simple shifts may include:

- reducing visual clutter
- softer lighting in the evening
- opening blinds for natural light
- creating a calming corner for rest
- improving sleep environments
- reducing digital overstimulation
- adding supportive sensory elements like plants, calming music, or comforting textures

This is one reason why intentional environments and Feng Shui principles can be so supportive when navigating stress and overwhelm.

Our surroundings influence how we feel.



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Signs You May Be Running Low on Spoons

Sometimes the body begins whispering long before burnout fully arrives.

Possible signs may include:

- feeling emotionally reactive
- wanting to isolate
- increased exhaustion
- brain fog
- difficulty focusing
- resentment or irritability
- feeling overwhelmed by simple tasks
- craving excessive screen time or zoning out
- difficulty making decisions
- trouble sleeping despite exhaustion
- feeling emotionally numb

These are not personal failures.

They are often signals that the nervous system needs support.

How to Support Your Spoons

Supporting your energy does not always require dramatic life overhauls.

Often, healing begins with small, compassionate adjustments.

Gentle ways to support the nervous system may include:

1. Reduce unnecessary overstimulation

- Turn off unnecessary notifications
- Reduce background noise



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- Limit evening screen exposure
- Create moments of quiet

2. Create supportive routines

- Morning sunlight exposure
- Consistent sleep schedules
- Gentle movement
- Nourishing meals
- Hydration

3. Learn your energy patterns

Notice:

- What restores you?
- What drains you?
- Which environments feel calming?
- Which interactions leave you depleted?

Awareness is powerful.

4. Build restorative pauses into the day

The nervous system often benefits from moments of stillness before reaching full depletion.

This may look like:

- stepping outside for fresh air
- stretching
- deep breathing
- a short walk
- sitting quietly without stimulation
- a brief meditation practice

5. Honor your limits without shame

Not every season of life requires maximum productivity.

Sometimes the body is asking for restoration.



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Spoon Theory & Self-Compassion

One of the most healing parts of Spoon Theory is that it gives language to experiences many people silently carry.

It reminds us that:

- energy is not infinite
- healing is not linear
- capacity changes
- rest has value
- support matters

And perhaps most importantly:

Needing support does not make someone weak.

In many cases, it makes them human.

Final Thoughts

Many people today are navigating invisible exhaustion.

The world has become increasingly fast, stimulating, demanding, and emotionally heavy.

Understanding our personal capacity — and learning how to support the nervous system rather than constantly overriding it — can become an important part of sustainable wellbeing.

Sometimes wellness is not about pushing harder.

Sometimes it is about learning how to create a life, body, and environment that feel supportive enough for healing to begin.



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And sometimes, healing starts with simply recognizing:

“I may not be lazy. I may just be carrying more than my nervous system was designed to hold alone.”

About Creating Legacy Wellness

At Creating Legacy Wellness, we explore the connection between nervous system health, emotional wellbeing, integrative wellness, and supportive environments.

Through wellness coaching, education, and Feng Shui principles, the goal is to help individuals create more balance within their mind, body, and home.