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What To Do When You Feel Overwhelmed



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Just focus on the facts and what's actually happening right now, not what might in the future.



Be gentle and kind to yourself. When you're overwhelmed, do things that feel good to you; things ...

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Overwhelm can be caused by many work situations. It happens when a stressful situation gets to be just too much for us to handle. We often

experience it when we have a heavy volume of work and our to-do list is daunting. In these cases you can engage in time management strategies like delegating tasks, taking things off your to-do list, learning to create boundaries and say 'No' to more things - all very effective to lessen the burden and create more breathing room.

But what if you've done that and still feel overwhelmed? There are also many cases where the overwhelm is not even related to your volume of work. There can be a lot going on in our mind to make us feel stressed and like it's all too much. Perhaps you have a very important project you're under a lot of pressure to do well on or you're waiting to hear back about something important and all the uncertainty is putting you on edge. In these cases dealing with overwhelm is more about managing our thought processes and less about managing our time/tasks.

Here are 4 common causes of overwhelm beside work volume. Sometimes they can happen all at once! I share some points to keep in mind to help you navigate each as well as some tips for handling all the strong emotions that arise in these challenging times.

1. Fear of "bad" outcomes

There are times when we really want something to go a particular way. We can do everything we can to influence the outcome, but there may still be a lot of fear of the "bad" outcome happening. This fear can get intense and cause us to feel overwhelmed. What can help is to examine the scenario you fear in more detail. It can be so scary to think about that often we haven't really looked at what would happen up close. If you walk yourself through it in your mind and how you would respond if the thing you fear were to arise, you will likely see a way you could manage through it. It might even be not as bad as you initially thought. For example, if you're afraid of performing poorly on a project, walk through what would happen if you did. You might have some conversations with your boss about it, work to improve the next time, and if you actually end up being fired over it, look at how you could

respond and take your next steps. Even though you don't want it to happen, by looking directly at what we fear we can see things more clearly  and lessen our feelings of overwhelm.

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2. Uncertainty

While we might be afraid of the “bad” outcome discussed above, not knowing whether it will happen is also stressful. In fact, research has shown that [uncertainty around whether a bad thing will happen is even more stressful](#) than if we know the negative outcome is certain. For example, it's more stressful to know there are some layoffs coming and wonder if you're going to be let go than knowing for sure that you will. Uncertainty puts us in a very uncomfortable state and can cause us to feel overwhelmed.

Many of the “bad” things that occur in our lives are not predicted. Prior to the “bad” thing happening, we feel we are operating in certainty until the rug is pulled out from under us. The only difference here and why you're stressed is that you have awareness of the possibility of a “bad” thing happening. This awareness creates the opportunity to jump into the possible future scenario and stress about it. The only thing this awareness is useful for is giving you the chance to think through some actions you could take if the “bad” thing were to occur. But once you've done that it doesn't help much.

So what can you do? Once you've taken action to prepare where you can, try to stay in the present. Just focus on the facts and what's actually happening right now, not what might in the future.  Until you have more information to act from, let go and accept the uncertainty. There is no “life-

hack" for uncertainty; unless you want to stress out trying to control the world, acceptance is really the only way to go.

Have confidence in yourself that whatever happens (say, you are let go) you will be able to navigate your way through. Often life's challenges are actually not obstacles, but instead, opportunities to learn and experience personal growth. They're guiding us to where we need to be. You never know how the "bad" thing, say getting let go or receiving a poor review, might actually in the bigger picture be a very helpful or good thing nudging you along to where you find fulfillment and success.

3. Not having the answers to tough problems

When we have a problem we want an answer now. We want to fix it ASAP. But sometimes it's not so easy. When we're faced with a tricky problem and struggling to find a solution, we can find ourselves experiencing anxiety, worry and overwhelm. What we really need to do though is the opposite; relax. Stressing when we need to come up with a creative solution to a challenging problem just makes things more difficult. Stress interferes with creative thinking. It can also result in poor decision making as when overwhelmed we can have [black and white thinking or reach for extremes](#).

Reflect on times when you came up with an ingenious solution to a challenge. What mental state were you in? Likely you were holding the problem lightly, felt relaxed, and maybe you weren't even thinking about the problem when the answer naturally came to you. I know relaxing may be challenging when you're in a situation where you feel pressured, but do your best. You could even try activities (like freeway driving or showering - anything that feels automatic) that shift your brain from beta to [theta waves - the best type for problem-solving](#).

Lastly, research has shown that positive [self-affirmation through reminding ourselves of our values](#) and what's really important in our lives (such as

friends and family etc.) can improve problem-solving in stressed individuals. It facilitates more open and creative thinking.

4. Mind racing with thoughts

All of the above - fear of a “bad” outcome, uncertainty in it happening and not having a solution to a problem - can make our mind race with thoughts going in every direction. All the thoughts can easily bring on overwhelm. While you can employ the strategies I mention above, another helpful approach comes from the mindfulness techniques of [Acceptance and Commitment Therapy](#).

Instead of trying to push these thoughts away we can just observe and accept them. For example, let's say you're worried about whether you're going to do well on a project and having thoughts of self-doubt. You can say to yourself, “I notice I'm having the thought that I'm not going to be able to meet my the expectations for this project.” The goal is to connect with the part of you that is aware of and separate from the thought. When we do this we reduce the thought's emotional charge and help ourselves move forward without feeling so consumed by the thought.

A few more things to try when you feel overwhelmed

In addition to the above, here are a few more tips that can help when the feeling of overwhelm arises:

Get into the present moment. This gets us out of our racing thoughts of the past and future. Whatever way you find most effective for you to get into the present is great. I find it helpful to ground myself in my body; focus on feeling the clothes on your skin, do a 5-minute ‘body-scan’ meditation where you check-in with each part of your body, take an exercise class like yoga. Whatever works for you.

Allow the feelings to be there. A lot of stress can come from trying to get rid of or suppress the feelings. Instead, try to just acknowledge them and let

them be there. You can be aware of and let the emotions arise in you without having them take over. They will eventually pass, and they usually pass more quickly when we don't resist.

Be gentle and kind to yourself. When you're overwhelmed, do things that feel good to you; things that are positive, comforting, healthy and uplifting. This is the time when you need to be emphasizing self-care. This will help to calm your nervous system, get you out of **fight-or-flight** and help you handle things from a clearer place.

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