

Feeling Overwhelmed At Work

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It's an average Tuesday afternoon: you have two kids who need to be at football and drama practices miles apart. You also have a client who won't stop emailing revisions to a presentation that was due last week. On top of it all, your car is making a weird clanging noise and your dog has kennel cough from his doggy daycare visit. Feeling overwhelmed? It's not surprising.

When we feel overwhelmed, we can struggle with our personal relationships. It can impact decision-making and cause both physical and psychological problems. Understanding the impact of feeling overwhelmed and what we can do to deal with it can help us stay healthy.

Understanding Overwhelm

You may know what being overwhelmed feels like, but it might not be as easy to put words to what you're feeling. "Overwhelm refers to an intense emotional state in which an individual feels unable to manage or process the demands placed upon them," explains psychologist Priya Nalkur. "It

occurs when the cognitive and emotional resources required to deal with a situation exceed the individual's perceived ability to cope, leading to feelings of helplessness, anxiety and stress."

What Happens When You're Overwhelmed

When a person is overloaded, feelings of depression, pessimism, anxiety and dread can creep in. You might feel powerless about your situation and unable to make decisions. It's not easy knowing [what to do when you feel overwhelmed](#), but understanding what's happening in your mind and body is a good first step.

Emotional Lability

If you ever went off the deep end when you couldn't locate your car keys, but the real problem was feeling stressed by work deadlines, you've experienced [emotional lability](#). These rapid mood changes are often a result of an overwhelmed system and can cause relationship problems and lead people to think you have a short fuse. You can have an exaggerated reaction to situations, which can stress relationships.

Impacts On Physical Health

There can also be physical manifestations when a person is overwhelmed. According to the [American Psychological Association](#), these can include tension headaches, trouble sleeping, increased heart rate and blood pressure, and upset stomach.

Dealing with the "[Sunday scaries](#)"? Then you probably know what it's like to feel overwhelmed at work.

Dread can creep in when you have an impending deadline or a demanding supervisor emailing you after hours, or result from imposter syndrome when you feel you aren't good enough. You may be catastrophizing, magnifying small problems into bigger issues or resorting to black-and-white thinking instead of seeing the nuances of what is going on.

Being overwhelmed in the workplace can impact both professional performance and personal well-being, according to psychotherapist Zack Goldman. "Decision-making becomes particularly difficult, as the mental clutter and stress make it hard to weigh options and choose the best course of action," he says. "Productivity often suffers because the individual may struggle to prioritize tasks effectively, leading to missed deadlines or a decline in the quality of work.

This situation can create a vicious cycle, where falling behind on tasks leads to even greater stress and further diminishes the ability to catch up."

Practical Strategies To Deal With Overwhelm At Work

When tasks build up and the feeling of overwhelm takes over, it's good to have a few [healthy coping strategies](#) and [practical tactics](#) in your back pocket. Taking a break to go on a short walk or get a breath of fresh air can help you regroup and recenter yourself. Make a list of the tasks you need to complete and prioritize them. Some of the tasks on your plate might better suit one of your teammates, which you can discuss with your manager.

Try breaking down tasks into smaller, bite-sized pieces that are less overwhelming than tackling the whole task at once. A “yes, no, maybe” list can help to address a big decision and break it into parts. Combine this with time management strategies like the [Pomodoro® Technique](#) to focus for a short time with a break at the end.

Ultimately, if you're overwhelmed and don't see an end, setting boundaries and asking for help might be the best answer. Sometimes, our supervisors aren't aware of how overloaded we are until we speak up.

Feeling Overwhelmed In Life

The feeling of being overwhelmed can impact your broader life beyond work. “People generally experience overwhelm when a multitude of demands exist in a short span of time,” says licensed clinical counselor Mona Nour, Ph.D. “This feeling can be exacerbated when demands are spread across multiple life roles.”

Major life transitions like buying a house, moving across the country and adding a child to a family can push a person over the edge, making them feel that it's just “too much.” Financial pressures and health concerns can pile on stress. Add things outside your control, like a recession or a pandemic, and you're in a tailspin.

Building resilience takes time, but it's key in combating overwhelm. Practicing self-care rituals, developing a support network at work and home, and fostering a growth mindset will go a long way. Start by asking yourself a few [questions when you feel overwhelmed](#). Think about your self-care, end goals and next steps you can take.

What To Do When You Feel Overwhelmed

Instead of going straight to the worst-case scenario when you feel overwhelmed, employ a few constructive strategies. These can slow negative thoughts and move the situation in a positive direction.

Mental Techniques

When you're in the weeds at work or agonizing over a difficult situation at home, it can feel like there's no way out. Try [mental techniques](#) to help you focus on the bigger picture and alleviate some of the burden.

- **The fork-in-the-road technique.** If you have a big decision, conceptualize it as a fork in the road. Think about the different paths you can take and potential consequences. Decide in your head what you will do and sit with that decision. Do you have a sense of calm or does it give you anxiety? This can indicate how the final decision will feel. Once you've made the choice, stand behind it to help build confidence for future decisions.
- **Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)** is another option for those stuck in a loop of irrational thoughts. It can help you unlearn negative behaviors and change unhelpful ways of thinking. Through role-playing, a person can learn how to address a challenging situation in a different way, addressing it head-on instead of avoiding it.
- **Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)** is a method of managing overwhelm through meditation, yoga and positive thought processing. This multi-week program has been shown to reduce anxiety, increase focus and manage pain.
- **At-home relaxation and focus techniques.** Download a meditation app and incorporate the practice into your daily routine. Use thought-challenging worksheets to break a negative thought cycle. Physical movement, breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation can all be helpful as well.

Be Kind To Yourself

It can be hard to say no when we've been conditioned to please others and say yes to any request. Nobody can do everything, and it's OK to set the boundaries we need. We can feel compassion for others, but it can be challenging to do the same for ourselves. Positive self-talk is a step in the right direction; you can retrain how you think through simple mindfulness activities.

Be kind to yourself in times of stress with self-care rituals. Make time to get together with friends, take a yoga class or hike to alleviate stress. Try creative outlets like painting or pottery alone or with support people. While it might seem selfish at first, these activities can help you refocus and [motivate you to tackle what is in front of you](#).

"Physical well-being can improve with a daily five-minute breathing practice, improved sleeping habits and regular exercise," shares Melissa Lewis-Duarte, Ph.D.. "Bear in mind, you can't really separate mind and body, so positive mental habits boost physical well-being, and vice versa."

Ask For Help

Often, barriers such as cultural norms prevent a person from asking for help. We fear judgment from others and want to hide our problems, showing only the positive. However, worrying about stigma is unhealthy and can prevent us from asking for help when needed.

Lean on your support network by asking for help. You may find that most people want to help and feel honored that you've asked them. Try writing out your needs before reaching out to a trusted support person so you can effectively express what you need. Using "I" statements will help your support person understand where you are coming from so they can engage as an active listener and provide helpful feedback. Practicing expressing yourself can also help you develop assertive communication skills.

Consider having someone outside your circle listen to what you are going through. If you engage the assistance of a trusted mental health expert, they can listen to your struggles, talk through options and see the situation in a different way.

You Can Overcome Feelings Of Being Overwhelmed

Recognize when you're feeling overwhelmed so that you can address it before it gets insurmountable. Struggling alone can lead to faster burnout and affect mental and physical well-being. Asking for help from friends, colleagues, family members or mental health professionals can help you feel supported in what you are going through.

Many people have a tendency to say yes to all requests for help, but sometimes, you just don't have any more gas in your tank. Recognizing this and setting boundaries is an act of self-preservation and should be respected. You'll [feel energized and ready to work](#) once you have a better balance of what needs to be done.

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Kate Loweth is a writer and editor based in the San Francisco Bay Area with over a decade of experience covering travel, parenting, business and culture. Her work has appeared in outlets including USA Today, Business Insider, AARP, AAA and Thrillist. Kate is happiest when she's traveling with her three teenagers and exploring a new city or national park.

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