

Overwhelmed: The Science of Stress Overload and How to Navigate It



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Article Summary:

This article examines the complex experience of feeling overwhelmed, distinguishing it from related states like anxiety and burnout. Dr. Cluley blends personal reflection with research to explore what it means to feel consumed by demands. She also shares practical, evidence-based strategies for navigating overwhelm in the moment and reducing its intensity in the future. The article offers insights into how organizations can play a proactive role by identifying sources of stress, supporting employees effectively, and building a culture that prevents burnout before it begins. Professionals and business leaders will gain a clearer understanding of overwhelm and actionable tools to address it at both the individual and organizational level.



Overwhelm isn't permanent. With strategies to manage stress, build resilience, and ask for help, we can regain control and prevent future burnout.

Sometimes I just feel overwhelmed. For me, this happens when I have taken on too much at work and at home. I'm left scrambling to figure out what to prioritize, facing what feels like 300 hours' worth of tasks with only a fraction of that time to spare. For a friend of mine, who already has a demanding career and now has the second job of caring for her elderly parents, her situation is fraught with substantial time demands as well as heavy emotional labor. Overwhelm isn't just a personal challenge—it is a common stress response related to anxiety and one that can lead to burnout. The good news is that research provides strategies to help us regain control.

WHAT OVERWHELM IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT

Science defines the experience of overwhelmed (aka stress overload or distress) as “excessive amounts and types of demands that require action, are experienced as a problem, and contribute to the development of other problems”. It's actually three experiences at once – overwhelm is experienced as turbulence, isolation, and searching.

One feels an all-consuming turbulence, like being swarmed or crushed by all that life has in store for you. One may also feel isolated in this stew of chaos, like you and only you, are left helpless at the center of it. And lastly, once again you, and only you, are left searching for solutions. These problem-solving cognitions can take on a fleeting, ruminating, and self-deprecating flavor that may only serve to fuel the overwhelm.

Overwhelmed is different from burnout. I've been burnt out before and during that period I felt exhausted as well as

distant from my responsibilities, projects, and team. It was like I was no longer able to muster my usual enthusiasm and concern. Overwhelmed feels like being overly central to responsibilities and meeting community needs, a powerful urge to get it all right. It's hyperstimulation, but unfocused and flailing. An overly activated state rather than a giving-up state (though some people do feel faint or tired in response to distress). Burnout is a longer term, deep exhaustion that can last for months or years. Overwhelm and burnout are certainly related. I think of overwhelmed as those periods of peak stress, whereas burnout is the long-term shutting-down response to frequent or intense episodes of overwhelm.





OVERWHELMED	STRESS	ANXIETY	BURNOUT
<p>Excessive amounts and types of demands that require action, that are experienced as a problem, and that contribute to the development of other problems</p> <p>Distress or stress overload experienced as turbulence, isolation, and/or searching.</p>	<p>Stressor: a physical and psychological demand that initiates the stress response (the things that stress us)</p> <p>Stress: generalized, patterned, unconscious mobilization of the body's natural resources when confronted with a stressor (our bodies response to stressors)</p> <p>Strain: behavioral, psychological and medical consequences of prolonged stress</p>	<p>Excessive and persistent worrying and fear about everyday things, typically worrying about what might or could happen.</p> <p>An anticipating emotion experienced as worry, nervousness, fear, etc. with accompanied physical symptoms.</p>	<p>Type of strain that develops in response to chronic emotional, physical, and interpersonal stressors at work.</p> <p>Experienced as exhaustion, cynicism, and diminished professional efficacy.</p>

Overwhelm is also not anxiety, although being overwhelmed often comes with its fair share of anxious worrying. Anxiety is excessive and persistent worrying and fear about everyday things. In other words, it's one of the emotions you may feel when stressed. It's often anticipatory emotion - anxious worrying is usually about what might happen rather than what has already come to pass. Some people are more anxious than others and tend to worry a lot. As a personality type, people with "trait" anxiety (or neuroticism) are prone to perceive threats in just about every situation (generalized anxiety) or in specific types of situations (e.g. social anxiety). Anxiety is a natural reaction to stress, but anxious people are more likely to become overwhelmed in stressful situations and to burn out with long-term stress.

Other personality characteristics that are linked to stress include type A personality, perfectionism, external locus of control, and pessimism. However, it is important to remember personality is not destiny. Context plays a BIG role in stress – where you work and how the organization is managed, stage of life, where you live, and so many other things that are outside of your control contribute to overwhelm.

In fact, in her book Overwhelmed, Bridget Schulte examines how constant busyness has become a cultural norm in the U.S. and a sign of morality and status, which can feed the overwhelm.

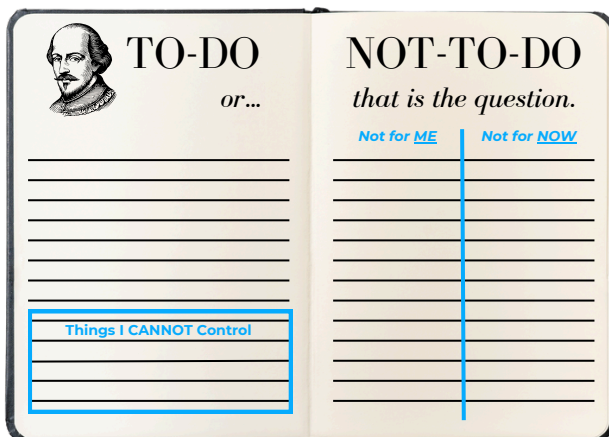
WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT OVERWHELM?

The truth is, not much if you are already experiencing it. When you get to the point of feeling truly overwhelmed, you need to make a plan and ask for help. Resist the urge to do everything all by yourself because plenty of others may be willing to help by providing task support, social support, or both. On the other hand, research shows that "anticipatory" and "preventive" measures are plentiful and worth investing in. These help you start to build resilience so that you will have fewer and less intense episodes of overwhelm in the future. Because overwhelm is about demands, many of the solutions have to do with eliminating unnecessary demands (aka stressors) as well as building up compensating resources. Let's first explore some evidence-based strategies to try when you are in full swing of the overwhelm. Then let's consider research that can help you and your organization prevent future overwhelm.



STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING CURRENT OVERWHELM

For many of us, asking for help does not come naturally. Fortunately, it is a skill you can develop. First, you need to get clear about what needs to get done (and what does not), by whom, and by when. I recently received a seemingly corny gift from a Shakespearean theater outing – a “*To Do or Not To-Do*” list. When you are feeling overwhelmed, start by rethinking your to-do list. Breakdown the bigger projects so they are itemized by tasks. This lets you really understand the investment of time in different pieces (and it’s also a calming and centering exercise). Then let Shakespeare help you. Divide the “*Not To-Do*” side of the list into two sections: *Not For Me To-Do* and *Not To-Do Now*.



Once you are clear on the categories, then you can ask for help. I’ve found “I’m feeling overwhelmed with all the things I need to get done this week/month. I’m wondering if you could help me with *specific thing from the not for me to do section*, so that I can focus on getting some of these other tasks done on time” works well. I have also tried (and seriously do NOT recommend): “I feel like I must do everything around here and you don’t help at all. Can you please take over some of the stuff that needs to get done.”

This does not work because it doesn’t let others know you are asking because you need help, it accuses them of not being helpful in the first place, and it doesn’t let them know exactly what they can do to help.

Overwhelm often comes before burnout and is an early warning signal that we should be prepared to recognize and to act on.

Another thing I do is compare the “*To Do or Not To-Do*” list to my work-family calendar. I try to find creative ways to create blocks of extra time for working on the To Do items. While I try to maintain pretty good work-family boundaries on a normal basis, overwhelm may call for some counterintuitive or unusual approaches. Maybe I’ll ask another parent to carpool my daughter to her activity so that I can block off several hours of work in an evening when I normally wouldn’t be working. Or take a vacation day for a staycation to tackle a home project.

Overall, these approaches are in the category of problem- or task-focused coping and research has shown that people who are more effective at coping with stress are often skilled at things like active problem solving, planning, and clearing competing activities during instances of overwhelm. However, you may also realize that some things you are stressing about can’t be written on a To-Do list. It might also help to add a *category Things I Cannot Control*. By writing these down, it can help you acknowledge them but move them outside your mind where they are just taking up space needed for active problem solving.

Another effective way to cope is to seek out social support. Some of these Cannot Control items may be amenable to advice seeking or just venting. I find I prefer to vent to people who say things like “do you want me to try to help or do you just want me to listen.” I have also learned to preface my complaining with “can I vent for a moment” vs. “can I tell you about a situation and get your take on it” so that others know when I am or am not looking for advice or solutions. I’ve learned through trial and error that getting the response I need can help alleviate some of the stress while engaging in the wrong kind of social support can add to it.

STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING FUTURE OVERWHELM

Maybe you have been working on your time management skills and you still frequently end up in overwhelm. Try adding capacity management and energy management to the mix, as well as managing habits of the mind. We think about capacity management for staffing teams, but you can apply many of the same ideas to yourself. Work-life integration guru, [Jessica DeGroot](#), describes capacity management as estimating the quantity expected for a project or routine task as well as the pace and quality of that work. Other skills related to capacity management are learning to prioritize, setting and communicating realistic expectations and boundaries, and strategic delegation. Generally our capacity to do a job increases over the first year because it takes a while to become effective in a new role. This is because learning takes longer than doing. Whether you are new to the world of work, a seasoned professional but new to your role, or just taking on a stretch assignment, you’ll need extra time to complete new tasks.



Think about your scope of responsibilities and ask yourself, “Can I count on my usual level of efficiency or will there be a learning curve that I need to factor in here”. In times of learning, take on less because you will be doing more. Good onboarding, training, and mentoring can speed up the learning. If these are not provided for you, seek them out.

As we become seasoned professionals, we tend to grow in effectiveness and efficiency, however, many of us continue to underestimate the amount of time a project or task will take, especially the further away they are on the calendar. Only after being a mom for thirteen and a half years have I gotten better at mapping work and family projects, events, and endeavors well into the future so that I can anticipate and manage peak periods well before they are eminent. I have gotten much better at asking “When do we see the bulk of the work happening for this project?” or “Can I get the resources I need for that project earlier because I will need to have it done before starting the next thing?”. Beyond these more time management-oriented aspects, *communication and negotiation skills* will help you express your needs and boundaries, delegate, resolve conflicts, and negotiate “triple win” solutions where you specify how a new way of approaching something will be good for you, your work, and your team and organization.

Energy management can also help. This has to do with matching your tasks with your natural energy cycles as well as finding your best approaches to restoring energy that is expended. My husband is a true morning person. I am too but more like normal person hours, and I have one brother who is a night owl. According to research and Dan Pink in his book When, my husband, my brother, and I should be allocating time to do our most focused work during different parts of the day. For me, that's between 7:30 am and 11 am.

We should also break up stretches of work with recovery breaks that reenergize us, particularly ones where we get moving, get outside, or get social. The basics of self-care are super important for energy management (as they are for everything else). These include a full night's sleep, an overall healthy diet that works for you, movement and daily, weekly, and yearly times where you turn off work completely. This may mean working less overall but doing so more productively and intensely – which is kind of what most humans are built for anyway. During the predictable mid-afternoon slump, I find I can do movement tasks like chores or walking the dog, but I cannot not form a full, coherent sentence. Also, as an introvert, I have to budget my social time and have a quiet workspace. For me, art projects can be immensely energizing when my energy feels stuck on low. These things work for me for managing my energy. Your energy cycle is unique to you and it's worth figuring out what takes energy and what gives energy so that you can manage your work and personal tasks by riding the waves of energy rather than fighting against the drag of the energy troughs.

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The way we think about and react to stressful situations is influenced by our personality, past experiences, role models, culture, etc., so it's like a sedimentary rock formation – slow to form but solid once in place.

Research from different areas has shown that mindset does affect the way situations are experienced and that, with work, you can change your mindset. For example, one study about work-life balance showed that people can hold either a scarcity mindset where they believe time and resources are scarce and infinite and that devoting attention to work means less for personal endeavors or vice versa. Others hold expansionist beliefs about the abundance and expandable nature of resources and that spending time in one role can make you more capable and endowed in another role. Importantly, the study also found that people can learn to hold more expansionist views on balancing work and family.

Similarly, therapy can help individuals manage their thoughts and emotions around stressful events, helping them to spot negative, irrational, or self-sabotaging thought patterns and replace them with helpful thoughts and emotional responses. Cognitive behavioral therapy is a type of therapy that is particularly useful for anxiety and depression, which are closely related to stress responses. Retraining your mind and reactions to everyday demands and crisis is obviously a key premise of mindfulness training and research supports its effectiveness as well as related techniques like deep breathing and meditation.

Research on mindfulness training has shown that it can significantly reduce episodes of overwhelm and burnout. Lastly, emotional intelligence training can help you “use your emotions as data”. Your emotional state can be an early warning signal to make changes before you get to the state of turbulence (early warning signals include moodiness or agitation, loneliness, anxiety, feeling distracted) and emotional intelligence can help you when searching for solutions because you will better navigate your support network. Lastly, many people find that their religious faith helps them foster a conducive mindset in the face of stressful events as well as surround themselves with a supportive community.

Your emotional state can be an early warning signal to make changes before you get to the state of turbulence.

All and all, there are many techniques and strategies you can master to help you take on gratifying challenges while keeping overwhelm at bay. However, all the approaches outlined above (capacity management, energy management, cognitive reappraisal) are known as *secondary prevention* because they do not deal directly with stressors. Secondary prevention methods can build resilience, complement efforts to combat stress in organizations, and help us recognize that stressful experiences—such as change, ambiguity, and interpersonal challenges—are inevitable. *Primary prevention* is dealing directly with sources of stress, so they aren't reoccurring and contagious sources of overwhelm and burnout.

Below, I outline how primary prevention can be put into practice in organizations, but the same ideas could be used in your personal life.



Research has shown that improving communication, assuring an appropriate workload, and allowing employees to participate in decision-making are common ways to reduce overwhelm and burnout.

HOW CAN YOUR ORGANIZATION HELP?

Research confirms what we already know - that the workplace is a major source of stress in our lives. Stressors related to work come from many sources including the amount of work but also things like pressure, ambiguity, or difficulty of tasks. As discussed, some people are more prone to stress, but an employees' level of training and experience will also impact the resources they have to do their work stress free or the amount that certain stressors bother them. The work environment and work-family conflict can also contribute plenty of stressors. If you'd like to see the lengthy itemized list of potential work stressors, this is a great place to look.

When employees are overwhelmed, an organization's best response is primary prevention. This involves seeking out the sources of stress and addressing them. This "root causes analysis" approach acknowledges that there are many, many sources of stress as well as many solutions, but that the best approach matches unique solutions to unique causes. Basically, you deal with stressors directly, either by eliminating those sources of stress or adding resources where needed. Organizations can monitor changes in stress and stressors through their routine employee surveys. Research has shown that improving communication, assuring an appropriate workload, and allowing employees to participate in decision-making are common ways to reduce overwhelm and burnout. People managers can also learn to continually monitor stress levels, identify root causes of stress, and make operational adjustments when needed.

Additionally, helping employees understand how their work contributes to the mission and vision of the organization can decrease stress by enhancing a sense of purpose and belonging. Toward this end, the skill set of contemporary managers should include stress management skills such as personal stress, time, and boundary management as well as skills related to monitoring and responding to others' stress, facilitating difficult individual and group conversations, and helping employees set goals, prioritize, realize vision, and see setbacks as opportunities for growth.

As a side note, it can be stressful when dealing with easily stressed people. We tend to be annoyed by or ignore our anxious colleagues. I suggest trying to be a little grateful for them. They are a bit like canaries in a coal mine – they can act as an early warning signal about the things that will become tomorrow's stressful problems and spot flaws in our meticulous planning. In the right role and given the right voice, our anxious enemies can become our greatest allies.

Lastly, organizations should be prepared to respond to employees who are already overwhelmed. This is called tertiary prevention, however, what you are hoping to prevent here are the psychological and physical illnesses that can accompany long term, unchecked distress. When employees show signs of psychological or medical symptoms, they should be directed to treatment by trained professionals.

Managers need to be familiar with the signs and symptoms of distress, burnout, depression, etc. and processes for getting employees access to the resources they need for recovery. Organizations can invest in mental-health first-aid training for people managers.

Human Resource programs and policies, such as flextime or short and longer-term leaves, can be very helpful for giving the employee the space they need to deal with the overwhelm, particularly if there are demands in their personal life contributing to the problem. However, if most of the issue stems from stressors within the workplace, then taking time off but returning to the same stressful environment may just create a rollercoaster effect with chronic stress leading to periods of overwhelm and then burnout.

Overwhelm is a fleeting yet intense experience—recognizing it early and using evidence-based strategies can make all the difference in turning stress into resilience.

Some say that stress is the "spice of life" - it's a good thing that happens when we accept challenge and growth through stretching ourselves into new and exciting places. However, all too often, the spice level gets way too spicy. Overall, stress is just as good for us (challenge, growth, motivation, etc.) as it is bad for us. It all depends on quantity and timing and our mindset about the things we have going on, as well as the skills we have developed along the way. Understanding overwhelm, and its cousins burnout and anxiety, helps us adjust the spice to just the right level. Overwhelm often comes before burnout and is an early warning signal that we should be prepared to recognize and to act on. By learning to listen to this signal, we have an opportunity to prevent further overwhelm and to prevent burnout.



MEET THE AUTHOR

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Heather supports better ideas and informed decisions through evidence-based HR. She holds a Ph.D. in Organizational



Behavior, an MS is in Industrial Organizational Psychology, and BS in Public Health Education. Heather's career has broadly focused on employee experiences and the organizational contexts that shape those experiences, particularly employee wellness and work-family integration. Her research on work-family decision-making and boundary management is published in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* and *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*. While Heather's expertise is in well-being and work-life balance, she is a work in progress like everyone else. She practices gratitude, basic self-care, and energy-management over the idea of traditional balance.