

# q advice: **OUTSMART OVERWHELM**

## 5 Techniques to Outsmart Feelings of Overwhelm

Our daily tasks, chores and 'to-dos' can often get the better of us. We're dealing with the impacts of COVID-19, plus we have to work from the dining table, home-school in the kitchen and then try to put on a bright face and clean clothes for a meeting.

The feeling that things are too much to handle can be a common one. A response of overwhelm is a normal human reaction. It's when we feel like we're drowning in it all, overloaded with information and responsibilities and full to the brim of the emotions of the world we're in. But we need to be alert to overwhelm and its effects and not 'soldier on' or 'push through'. If we let overwhelm go on and on, unchecked, how we live, burn-out and other health challenges are waiting for us.

When the World Health Organization (WHO) reclassified burn-out not as a medical condition but as an occupational phenomenon, they were sending us a loud and clear message: we need to manage the chronic stress that pervades our lives. A 2018 study from the Mental Health Foundation in the UK found that in the previous year, 74% of people had 'felt so stressed they have been overwhelmed or unable to cope'.

That's a lot of us feeling stressed!

Overwhelm is a complex response and it can be more than just our mind buzzing during the night with all of things we should have said, or a to-do list as long as our arm! Three things that can combine to create overwhelm are: emotions, workload and information. When they pile up on top of the other, they cause a flood of feelings like you want to run from the room shouting 'Argh! Enough! Get me out of here!'

Here are five techniques to help you stay alert to overwhelming situations – whether they're emotional experiences, work or task related or when drowning under a huge amount of information.

- 1. Don't delete it.** We need overwhelm. It's part of being human and serves as a warning signal to us that something could be out of balance. Accept there are times when we will experience overwhelm.
  - 2. Go easier.** Be easy on yourself when you next experience an overwhelming situation. Notice it and get to know it. What brought it on? Was it a familiar situation that was overwhelming? Did it build and rise gradually like rising flood waters, or did it appear out of nowhere like a flash flood?
  - 3. Look at your load.** Are you doing too much at once or juggling an impossible and invisible number of tasks? Even the best jugglers know when to stop throwing things up in the air! Get all the things you're trying to do out of your head and onto a page, into an app or on a list.
  - 4. Prioritise three or four.** Set your sights on just three or four things you'll aim to do each day. When they're done, embark on the next task. Overwhelm doesn't stand a chance when you work like this.
  - 5. Stop fast switching.** Every time we switch tasks, when we're stressed or in a bit of a panic, it takes energy and attention. Neither of these are in endless supply. Take care of your energy reserves by working with something a little longer rather than jumping to something else out of panic.
- Bonus tip:
- 6. Practice focus.** The 'stop starting start finishing' mantra of clever software developers who produce plenty of great work is wise advice. We are easily distractable, so maintaining focus is something we get better at once we notice we've been distracted. Oh look, a kitten!

Seriously though, untamed and unending overwhelm can lead to longer term issues like burn-out and a host of physical complaints from diabetes and high cholesterol to the unsettling effects of sleeplessness and anxiety.

We have a clever brain on top of our shoulders. Rather than suffering under the weight of endless information, work and worry, we can do a number of things to outsmart overwhelm. With these tips, overwhelm might still come to visit, but it won't stay as long, or be as overbearing as it might have been in the past. Phew!

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outsmarting overwhelm

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