

# Feeling Overwhelmed?

By Eve Menezes Cunningham

**S**ometimes, when we feel overwhelmed, we need to keep going. Maybe we're in some sort of crisis situation and just need to gather all available resources and press on no matter how ill-equipped and exhausted we may feel.

But most of us aren't in those life or death situations. We've just become used to thinking we are and need to remember to take that often self-imposed pressure off ourselves.

The science backs up the common sense wisdom around taking ourselves away from stressors in order to return with more focus, energy and even enjoyment.

When we're stressed and pumping the stress hormone cortisol, we're in fight/flight mode. Something as simple as looking at a photo of a grandchild and feeling your heart fill with love or remembering the sunset from the top of a hill after an awesome hike may feel like the most self-indulgent thing imaginable but by choosing

thoughts that are likely to trigger feelings of awe, hope, love, gratitude, joy, pride and so on, researchers from the HeartMath Institute have found that we create natural performance enhancing hormone DHEA. As well as aiding concentration and focus and general feelings of well-being and yumminess, it inhibits the production of cortisol so can benefit us for hours.

The more we practice choosing the happy thoughts on a regular basis, the more likely we are to remember to quickly take out a mental picture of something that can instantly cheer us up in a particularly stressful moment. And we can also take steps to make life that bit less overwhelming by taking care of some of the practical things, too.

'A typical trigger of overwhelm is saying "Yes" to too many things,' says Magdalena Bak-Maier, the author of *Get Productive!*. 'The overwhelm comes from the brain when faced with having to deliver on the promises and worry that it can't be done. List

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everything that needs to be done and tackle the list one step at a time. If necessary renegotiate deadlines and learn from it.'

Just remembering that we're able to hold up to 9 things in our conscious mind when relaxed compared with as few as 5 when stressed may help you reduce impossible expectations and actually get more done even if saying 'No' to people feels uncomfortable at first.

Lyndsey Whiteside is a PR and PR Coach. 'The coaching side is beautifully organised,' she says. 'I know what I'm doing, when and why. The PR side is different. It's partly why I love it but it's also the cause of most of my angst. A large majority of the work is dealing with the media, creating new copy at a moment's notice or responding to urgent deadlines. The upshot is that what else was planned has to be bumped until later in the day. Part of the antidote is in briefing the client so that they know that there will be occasions where they have to approve copy quickly and having a strong enough relationship with the journalist so that they give us as much advance notice as possible. But mostly, it's making sure that everything else is sorted and done. I have a daily to do list and I have a minimum of three things that have to get done. I get such a buzz from ticking off my actions that I often go over the three things. I also have a half hour sand timer which I turn over to start a piece of work and I don't finish until the sand has run out. It makes me focus and without distraction and procrastination from the myriad of phones, emails and social media alerts that ping at me, my work becomes a lot smoother and my to do list turns in to a "ta da" list.'

'Today's overwhelm is the sheer volume of work,' agrees Wendy. 'I have a tendency to take on every bit of work offered just in case it never comes again. This often means trying to do several things at once. I never ever learn and I always end up panicking. I combine this with never turning invitations down (Fear of Missing Out syndrome). I cope very well with this low-level panic most of the time but sometimes, like today, it all gets on top of me. So this afternoon I have sat down and done some invoicing, bought a present I have been meaning to buy and cleared some files from my computer. None of them the actual work I needed to do but it's cleared the decks.'

Wendy's a woman after my own heart and considers swimming to be the best cure. 'Switching everything off and going swimming works a treat but I don't do enough of it.'

Like Lyndsey, Wendy breaks things down. 'One thing that works really well for me is chipping away at the tiny things before tackling the biggies. They are usually the things which make getting on with stuff hard. So if you have little things like booking a train, sending a letter, changing the bedding, sending an invoice hanging over you, you'll (I'll) never get down to actually writing that 2,000-word

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piece. Even if it's just buying loo rolls.'

Some coaches call this 'tolerations' – by taking a mental inventory of your whole life (if that feels overwhelming, break it down into sections such as work, love, fun, kids, health, money and so on) and listing all the things (like light bulbs that need replacing) and actually dealing with them. It can free up an enormous amount of energy for the bigger things.

'I'm probably feeling at my most overwhelmed right now,' says Rich Brady. Combining working in a family business while building a new one and raising a young family 'means my head is constantly juggling 101 things. My focus on duties for the original company has started to slip a little. Our social media presence, for both companies, is responsible for a great deal of our success and takes up most of my time day and night. The solution is in the pipeline, but it's not going to happen until next summer at the earliest. We intend to take on an apprentice or digital marketing trainee to take some of the pressure off me. That has its own set of headaches as we've never employed anyone outside of the family before.

'In preparation for becoming an employer, I'm sorting all the areas I'm responsible for into separate folders (ahead of collating them into a policies and procedures document) and it's actually helped me be more focussed with my time.' And like Lyndsey, he uses a timer to aid focus. 'I've got a little stopwatch, set for 25 minutes. It focuses my efforts on a task before moving on and has made things much clearer.' ■

### Breathe

Anytime you're feeling overwhelmed you can use your breath to support you. Conscious breathing like this helps strengthen the prefrontal cortex so aids concentration as well as our ability to regulate our emotions.

- 1 You might choose to pause for a moment in-between every breath to remind yourself that there's more space in your life than you might have thought.
- 2 Or you might choose to make your exhalation longer than your inhalation to activate the rest/digest part of the nervous system.
- 3 You might even want to imagine breathing in the earth's grounding energies through your feet and other body parts touching the ground and exhaling stresses and strains back into the earth where they can be transmuted for the benefit of the planet.