# Feeling Overwhelmed At Work? Workplace Mental Health Strategies



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All of us have felt moments overwhelmed with work. 20/20 has really challenged us all. Dealing with the global COVID pandemic, working from home, and high levels, we have an entirely new definition of feeling overwhelmed….and most of us are feeling it now more frequently than ever.

It's simply not sustainable to constantly deal with feelings of being overwhelmed every day. Attempting to push through only leads to something much worse:

burnout.

What can you do?

If you're feeling overwhelmed, it's not about working long enough or hard enough. Feelings of overwhelm come from over-commitment, prioritization issues, and communication problems. The good news is, you can solve all of these issues with a handful of strategies.

# Identify Triggers

The first thing you need to do is understand your triggers. If you feel overwhelmed at work, you're paralyzed. Rather than looking at things as a giant pile of tasks and responsibilities and waiting for inspiration to work through them, we end up confused, stressed, and on the verge of burnout.

It's easy to blame this feeling on other people but there's typically something more at play. Harvard Professor Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey explained that we feel overwhelmed when the complexity of modern life surpasses our complexity of mind – our ability to handle that level of complexity.

Feeling overwhelmed has nothing to do with your capabilities. It comes from failing to recognize the triggers that add complexity to your life.

The good news is that the triggers are easy to find. Ask yourself this:

**What are the one or two things that you can take off your plate right now that would relieve 80% of the stress you're currently feeling?**

Start by writing down everything you have to do. Then, pay special attention to the project or task that you've been putting off every week. What's causing you to procrastinate? Do you need to set smaller goals?

Sometimes, we trick ourselves into thinking that we want to do things when we really don't. The more your gut tells you not to do something, the more likely you are to push it aside and allow it to become a source of stress.

*Allowing yourself to feel the stress, take a few deep breathes, then coming up with a plan of attack can go a long way toward making you feel better.*

# Set Boundaries

Identifying your triggers will help to immediately get rid of tasks that stress you out but this doesn't necessarily fix the underlying issue.

When we have an ever-growing workload our typical response is to put in more hours and work harder. We should be stepping back and examining what it is making us do this and find a new way to operate.

Fight the urge to get started back in your tasks and take a short break to walk around for a few minutes. This helps get your brain out of survival mode to allow you to develop a proper strategy to come back stronger than ever.

Consider the boundaries around your workload and time. This may mean setting a specific starting time for the day or saying no to the projects and tasks that push you beyond your comfort zone. To hold yourself accountable, set up a time block schedule where you assign each block of working time a specific type of task. For instance, your most important projects or deep work, then you're busy work like chat, email, meetings, but also give you the time you need to take a break.

A clearly defined schedule helps you to connect your workload to the actual time you have every day rather than overloading your schedule. This is also a chance to clearly define what work you'll say no to in the future and then develop if and then statements to deal with that otherwise overwhelm you.

For example, if I receive a work email after 4 p.m., then I will leave it for tomorrow morning.

At that point, you're not engaging in procrastination. You're fostering work-life balance by addressing the email that comes in at 4:01 p.m. the next morning. Take time at scheduled points throughout the day to address your email, to keep the amount of time you spend on responses reasonable.

# Challenge Your Assumptions

You may start to hear yourself repeat some of the unproductive habits that cause you to feel overwhelmed in the first place. These are your big assumptions. For example, if I don't take care of this myself it won't be good enough in the project will fail.

These big assumptions are what cause you to take on entirely too much work and overcomplicate things for yourself. While it's true that they feel real, they aren't often 100% accurate.

Ask yourself: **What assumptions am I making right now about my workload and expectations?**

Can you prove that these assumptions are true?

Take a few minutes to talk to your co-workers and managers about these assumptions. Discuss what you're working on, what stressing you out, and ask what they would do in your position.

Sometimes, saying these things out loud can help you clarify what's important, and what you can deal with in some other way. Unfortunately, ¾ of people have never had a conversation with their co-workers or manager about workplace expectations.

If you're worried about talking to your boss about these issues, approach the conversation so you're being proactive about your workload. Say that you feel like you have a lot on your plate and you would love help figuring out the best way to handle all of it. That not only shows you're concerned about the quality of your work but also lets your manager know they should not be asking any more of you right now.

# Prioritize

This is a pivotal part of escaping the feelings of overwhelm. You need to prioritize the one thing you have to get done today. You most likely got yourself into the situation because it felt like most of the tasks on your plate carry equal importance but they don't. Reaching inbox zero doesn't have the same priority is finishing the presentation for tomorrow. Treating it as if it does will only make things worse.

Prioritize your task list and pick a single project to complete. The point is to make it feel like a small task. Action breeds more action. The progress principle ensures that by crossing off smaller items, we have a surge of motivation and confidence. Choose a task that is manageable and you can clearly see that you've completed it.

Generally speaking, the things that add stress to your day aren't objectively hard but physiologically hard. For instance, writing an email you've been dreading or giving someone bad news though simple, is easy to delay because you don't like the way it makes you feel finishing a task you started but didn't finish or one that you have been avoiding is a great way to jumpstart your confidence.

There are several ways to prioritize your list, but opting for the more time-consuming tasks first, when you are most fresh, is a common approach.

# Progress Not Perfection

Now, you should have a challenging but manageable list of work to do and a clear path to help you get started. But, you're not necessarily out of the woods yet. Part of what often causes us to feel overwhelmed is perfectionism. Perfectionists complicate even simple tasks creating more work, more pressure, and more stress for themselves.

You work yourself out of feeling overwhelmed, maintain your perspective on what really needs to get done. Work in short intervals of 30 to 60 minutes. At the end of each interval, look at what you've accomplished and ask yourself if it is enough.

At a certain point, working longer hours to get "more done" doesn't equal better work. When you find yourself hitting a wall, ask you really need to push through or if you need to take it as a sign that it's time to stop. This is especially true when working remotely since the lines between work and home tend to blur a bit more.

Instead of waiting until you are completely done, ask for feedback at 30% and 90% moments. Get high-level feedback at 30% done and more specific comments at 90% done.

Do one thing at a time. It's difficult to be overwhelmed if you're focusing on only one thing.

# Don't Be Afraid to Delegate

We all have more than one task to accomplish every day. Dealing with your overloaded to-do list is an important part of addressing stress at work. When you have a lot of goals and ideas, easy to feel guilty about not working on all of the things. This is where you need a not-to-do list.

Go through your list of work and triggers and write down everything that you

won't do. These are not the tasks you're ignoring or throwing in the garbage, but instead, ones that you can easily delegate to someone else.

Delegate tasks to those who are capable and willing. If they are less capable, but willing to do the job for them with someone else to provide such as they learn. Your end goal is to remove the sense that only you can do the work and to recognize the support around you. Asking team members for help or delegating tasks to others is not admitting defeat, but showing that you know what matters and where you should be spending the majority of your time. You may be surprised to find that a lot of people are willing to help, and you can help them, too, without adding stress.

The focus of this article is about how to handle feeling stressed and overwhelmed when it comes to working, it's crucial to recognize just how much of our personal lives seep into our workday.  It's not possible to put up a mental barrier at work if you're already feeling stressed in your own life. As you work through the process, take care of yourself. Well balanced diet, spend some time outside, safely socialize with people you care about, take breaks, get plenty of sleep.

You cannot expect to be as productive as possible if you are burning the candle at both ends not properly nourishing your body with what it needs. Taking time to take care of yourself we'll make the results from following these steps even better.

At the end of the day, we all have the same 24 hours. If you're trying to do too much, even the best time management skills won't give you enough time to get everything done. An essential part of self-care lies in making sure you have enough free time to relax and enjoy yourself. The most productive people know how important it is to have time to unwind – even if it means they have to schedule it.

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