Feeling Overwhelmed

Feeling overwhelmed is probably the most common symptom of stress among college students. Its message, if heeded, is valuable: Your life has gotten too complicated, your commitments too many. This feeling warns us that we’ve lost control of our lives. Creators often notice feeling overwhelmed when it shows up as a tightness or pain in their jaw, shoulders, or lower back. Or they may notice themselves thinking, “If one more thing goes wrong, I’m going to scream!” Or, maybe they *do* scream! With this awareness, Creators understand it’s time to make a change and lessen the distress of feeling overwhelmed.

**Choose new behaviors:** Here are some actions you can take when you feel that your life is stretched a mile wide and a millimeter thin:

* *Separate from an external stressor.* Perhaps the external stressor is a neighbor’s loud music or a demanding job. You can choose to study in the library where it’s quiet and find a new job with fewer demands.
* *List and prioritize everything you need to do.* Using a “next actions list,” record all of your incomplete tasks for each life role. Assign priorities to each task: A = Important & Urgent actions. B = Important & Not Urgent actions. C = Unimportant actions. *Delete C’s.* Identify where you are wasting time and cross them off your list. *Delegate A’s and B’s*. If possible, ask another person to complete some of your important tasks (e.g., Ask a friend to pick up your dry cleaning). *Complete remaining A’s and B’s yourself*. Start with your A priorities (e.g., For an upcoming term paper, visit the library and take out three books to begin researching your topic). Move on to your B priorities (e.g., Go to the tutoring center for help with math). Spend time doing only A and B priorities and watch your overwhelm subside.
* *Discover time-savers.* Use an app that connects your to-do list items with their locations so you are reminded of the errand when you are in that area.
* *Say “no.”* Admit that your plate is full and politely refuse requests that add to your commitments. If you do agree to take on something new, say “no” to something now on your plate. Also so “no” to unhealthy relationships. Practice saying “no” by role-playing with a friend.
* *Keep your finances organized.* A survey of 11,000 adults by *Prevention* magazine revealed that their number one source of stress is worry over personal finances. So curtail unnecessary spending, pay bills when due, balance your checkbook. Use online and automated bill-paying systems.
* *Exercise.* Aerobic exercise increases the blood levels of endorphins, and these hormones block pain, create a feeling of euphoria (the exercise high), and reduce stress. One caution: Consult your doctor before dramatically changing your level of exercise.

**Choose new thoughts:** Since we create the inner experience of feeling overwhelmed in our mind, we can un-create it. Here’s how:

* *Elevate.* Rise above the overwhelm and see each problem in the bigger picture of your life, noticing how little importance is really has. From this new perspective, ask, “Will this really matter one year from now?” The answer is often “no.”
* *Trust a positive outcome.* How many times have you been upset by something that later turned out to be a blessing in disguise? Since it’s likely, look for the blessing.
* *Take a mental vacation.* Picture a place you love (e.g., a bench by a river, white-sand beach, mountain retreat, or peaceful city park) and spend a few minutes visiting it in your mind. Enjoy the peace and rejuvenation of this mini-vacation.

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