



Managing Yourself

5 Mistakes We Make When We're Overwhelmed

by Alice Boyes

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Published on HBR.org / April 27, 2021 / Reprint [H06BPX](#)



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When you feel overwhelmed, you may react in ways that not only don't help the situation, but that even make it worse. Maybe you're oblivious to these patterns, or you know what they are but struggle to do anything about them.

The following are five common self-sabotaging mistakes overwhelmed people tend to make. There are practical solutions for each that will help you feel like you're on top of things and do a better job of navigating your most important tasks and solving problems.

1. You think you don't have time for actions that would help you.

People often have great ideas about things that would help them feel better and more in control — for example, hiring someone to help around the house, practicing self-care, seeing a therapist, taking a vacation, or organizing a game night with friends. However, they dismiss them because they think they're too busy or that it's not the right time, waiting to take those actions until a more ideal moment that typically never arrives.

Instead of thinking about what would be ideal, choose the best option that's easily available to you *now*. Perhaps you don't have time to research the best therapists by interviewing multiple candidates, but you do have time to pick someone who meets a few of your criteria and try a couple of sessions with them.

When you have good ideas but don't act on them, it can lead to a sense of powerlessness or incompetence. You may also have endless open loops of "shoulds" and waste time and energy thinking the same thoughts over and over again. Plus, when you don't act, you miss out on the benefits you'd accrue from trying your ideas. By acting to help yourself, you'll get practice finding doable solutions, feel more self-efficacy, and reap those benefits sooner.

2. You don't utilize your unconscious mind enough.

Focus isn't the only way to get things done. Your unconscious mind is great at problem-solving, too.

When I go for a walk, my mind wanders. I don't aim to walk mindfully; rather, I let my mind drift without directing it too much. When I do this, it invariably meanders to work, but not in an unpleasant way. Solutions to problems magically emerge, and what I should prioritize becomes clearer without effort.

Even knowing this, it's hard to allow myself to take a walk early in the workday (before temperatures where I live get too hot). What's fascinating is that when I walk before work, my anxiety about the work I need to start once I get home creeps up. However, this doesn't get in the way of me having insights into my problems and priorities. Both can occur together.

Your unconscious, wandering mind is as valuable a tool for solving problems and creative thinking as your focused mind. Utilizing your wandering mind will help you get important things done, without so much pressure to be focused and undistracted all the time, which can be an unreasonable expectation.

People who are feeling overwhelmed sometimes try to block out work thoughts during their personal time by listening to music, a podcast, or other entertainment. But that can rob you of some of the productivity potential of your drifting mind. Try identifying the activities during which your mind naturally drifts in helpful ways and solves problems for you. For me, these include running errands (driving), exercising, taking showers, and lounging in the sun.

3. You interpret feeling overwhelmed as a weakness.

Lots of times, we feel overwhelmed simply because we need to do a task we're not very familiar with, or because a task is high stakes and we want to do a superb job of it. By itself, this isn't necessarily a problem. We can often work through the task despite those overwhelmed feelings.

However, sometimes we get self-critical about the very fact that we feel overwhelmed. We think: "I shouldn't feel overwhelmed by this. It's not that hard. I should be able to handle it without it stressing out." When you're self-critical, you become more likely to procrastinate, because not only does the task trigger feelings of overwhelm, it also triggers shame or anxiety about having those feelings.

Some people react to this shame and anxiety in other ways. They might approach the task with extra perfectionism, or they might become more reluctant to ask for tips and advice from others. It's important to replace your self-criticism with compassionate self-talk, which I've provided specific strategies for previously.

4. You default to your dominant approaches and defenses.

When we get stressed out, we tend to get a bit more rigid. Because we have less cognitive and emotional bandwidth to consider other options, we become less flexible about adapting to the demands of the situation and default to our dominant ways of handling things.

We all have values, but we don't always use them to our advantage. For example, thoughtfulness can turn into overthinking, self-reliance can morph into micromanaging or doing everything yourself, having high standards can lead to being picky or perfectionistic, and resourcefulness can steer you toward doing things in unnecessarily complicated or unconventional ways.

When you're overwhelmed, make sure you're matching your values to the demands of the situation. Does the particular task or problem need _____? (Insert your dominant value, such as thoughtfulness or self-reliance.) Or would a different approach be better suited to the circumstances?

5. You withdraw from your supports.

If you feel overwhelmed, you've probably got limited emotional energy. This can lead to important changes in your behavior and emotional availability. They can be subtle — maybe you usually give your child a long hug when they come to you, but instead, you now give them a quick perfunctory squeeze while still thinking about other things, then get back to whatever you were doing.

This is self-sabotaging. You're missing opportunities to fill up your emotional cup when you need it most, and you risk your loved ones noticing the differences and acting out to get your attention (for example, a child drawing on a wall, or a spouse picking an argument about something unimportant).

Identify ways you still enjoy connecting with your supports even when you've got limited emotional energy. For example, I like to draw alongside my five-year-old during my breaks, or construct something out of blocks and shapes with her. We also like to cuddle in bed while watching our own individual screens. If you struggle to get around to these activities, create routines for them so they fit into your day or week in specific places — for example, maybe you always bake with your child on Saturday mornings.

By being aware of the five patterns outlined here, you can make getting through busy and challenging times easier on yourself and those around you. They're understandable patterns to fall into — and not a reason for you to be self-critical. Know what the traps are and make easy, small changes to overcome them.



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