



“Code O”: How to recover from Overwhelm

BY SUSAN R. JOHNSON, MD, MS

“Overwhelm” is one of the new words-of-the-decade in the time management lexicon, as in, “I am dealing with overwhelm.” This was a fair descriptor of the world when I first wrote this article, and it is almost an understatement for these turbulent economic times of 2009: tasks coming at us from all sides, and expectations for our work and personal life that simply cannot be met—and in many workplaces, there are fewer people to do more work. The consequences of severe, persistent overwhelm can be serious: depression, stalled career progress, interpersonal messes. Because times are definitely worse, I’ve decided to reprise, with slight modification, this essay, which was first published in the fall 2006 newsletter of SELAM International (the Society for Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine—and thanks for their permission).

Note that in this usage, *overwhelm* is a noun, not a verb, implying that its origins are external to ourselves. I’m not going to argue about whose fault this state of affairs is—yours or theirs—but I will suggest here that you **do have control** over how you deal with overwhelm.

I am going to lay out a series of steps you should take when you find yourself in the midst of overwhelm—that is, when you are so riddled with guilt and anxiety that you find yourself paralyzed, unable to take any action at all. Even if you have never found yourself in quite such bad shape, my plan also rescues people from lesser degrees of trouble.

The core principle for emerging from this state is to get you to engage in the moment. When we are in overwhelm, we are flying back and forth between the past (guilt) and future (fear) and passing right over the current moment—which is the only time over which we have any control.

Code O: The Three Steps to Resuscitation

Every code has a resuscitation phase; in this one, you are simply trying to get control of your emotions and regain your ability

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to take action. The process will take anywhere from a few minutes to at most an hour to complete, and so you do not need to worry about getting further behind on your priorities.

Step 1. Stop and take a deep breath.

You need to bring your focus quickly back to this moment, and this is a time-honored and time-tested way to do it. If

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you have trouble with this, W. Timothy Gallwey recommends actually saying the word “STOP” aloud in order to get your own attention.¹

Step 2. Slow down.

This advice seems counterintuitive. You are behind! You need to go faster! Help! Remember the opening lines of Simon and Garfunkel’s “59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin’ Groovy)”?

Slow down, you move too fast—you’ve got to make the morning last...

As the song says, slowing down actually leads to the feeling that you have more time. The key is to couple slow motion with attention to the moment. The effect is to block out everything and focus entirely on what you are doing in this moment. Perhaps this works because you are not “wasting” any time thinking about the past or future—so only a third of the usual “stuff” is in your head.

Martha Ringer, productivity coach, says, “I practice ‘exaggerated slowness’ anytime I start to feel that ‘way out ahead of myself’ place.”²

You may doubt that this trick will help. When I recommended it to my then-secretary several years ago, she looked at me as if I were crazy. The next day, however, she came back and said that it had been a miracle.

Step 3. Complete a task.

Randomly choose a task from your immediate environment and do it. Your priorities are not important in this step—in fact, an obsession with trying to find the very highest priority task to do may have precipitated the overwhelming episode in the first place!

The point here is to get traction on the moment, engage your mind in work, and feel the victory of completing something. This will work with any task *as long as it is something that needs to be done*.

After you have done a few tasks and are feeling calm and focused, try to move in one of these directions:

1. Turn toward a high-priority task, or
2. Begin to implement one of the stabilization methods described in the next section.

(In the unlikely event you just can’t move to either of these, keep doing random—but needed—tasks, and try to move on later.)

Assorted Stabilization Methods

This next set of activities can be done in any order, over several days or weeks. They are intended to get you back on your feet, and in a position to start putting together

a long-term plan for organization and time management. Even if you stay in this phase for months, you will still be ahead of where you are now.

Make a list of everything you have to do.

The subtext here is that stress is increased the more you try to keep things in your head.³ Your brain was not designed to be a storage vault—it was designed to think.

Begin by taking a blank piece of lined paper (or type if you like) and spend about 15 minutes writing down everything you can think of that you have to do. Big, little; now, later; work, home—everything that is in your head. Your eventual goal is to create an inventory of all potential work—but in the beginning, even before the list is complete, this exercise will almost immediately convert your previous existential, free-floating anxiety into focused energy. Now you can see before you, in black and white, the actual challenges you face. Now you have the chance to make better decisions about what to do next, as well as what you should not do at all. And you get the pleasure—and energy boost—of crossing off the tasks you complete.

Jeffrey Mayer's method is the one I like best for this approach.⁴ Use a legal pad, date the top of the first page, and write one item on each line. Keep adding to this list as things come up. When a thing is done, cross it off by drawing a line all the way through. When a page is about 50% to 70% crossed out, tear off the page and copy the undone items on a new page, and continue adding new items as they come up.

Note that this is a “master” list, *not* a daily list. You should select no more than three critical tasks that you must do each day. Eventually you may want to work with a more sophisticated list system (the subject of future columns), but this simple running list will do for now.

Clear your work space.

The goal at this stage is not organization, but focus. Thus, it is OK for the short run if you simply put everything from your desk on the floor. This gives you a clear space in which to do each task, without your eye (and mind) being drawn off-task by seeing the other work you need to do. As a simple next step, make a file folder for every project



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you are working on, and put these folders in one place. Then you can see all your big tasks together, again giving you a concrete picture of your workload.

Find a 10% solution.

Stephanie Winston, the “mother” of modern time management, describes this method in her book *Getting Out from Under*.⁵ She advises that when you are in crisis, it is better to make small adjustments so that you can get back in control. To apply this method, think of activities in your daily life that seem to take too much time, or that specifically add to your sense of overwhelm. Select one, and break it down into steps. Look at each step separately, and see if there is a way it can be done more quickly or efficiently, delegated to someone else, or eliminated altogether.

For example, suppose you find yourself spending too much time doing laundry. The steps are collecting the dirty clothes, washing, drying, ironing, and distributing back to the owners. As a 10% solution, you could delegate the collecting and distributing to your children, and stop ironing the sheets!

Face up to the AWOL syndrome.

Mary McKinney, a psychologist who advises graduate students and faculty on achieving

academic success, recently described this syndrome in her monthly newsletter. If you are like me, you will recognize this immediately. You have promised to have a chapter ready in June. August rolls around, and you have not even started—and you begin to fantasize that the chapter is a hallucination. Then, in September, you receive a politely worded e-mail asking for a progress report. You ignore it. Thereafter come more e-mails, followed by telephone calls at increasing frequency. You ignore them, all the while building up a store of guilt and fear. Ms. McKinney calls this “going AWOL.”⁶ The solution sounds painful—but it almost never is. Simply call or e-mail (the latter is usually easier, unless you are very brave indeed) and say, “I am sorry I am late. Here is when I think I can get it done. Please let me know if that will work for you. Sincerely...” There is no need for going on and on about the late part—the recipient already knows you are late, and probably suspects that you are sorry. The only things that the recipient really wants to know are that you are alive, and that you will renegotiate a new deadline. I have experienced this syndrome many times in my career, and to date, not one bad thing has happened to me as a result of owning up.

“Overwhelm” may be inevitable, but by quickly recognizing it and performing a “Code O,” you can minimize the time you spend there. The stabilization techniques will get you back on track, and in a position to eventually make changes that will prevent serious overwhelm in the future. Those changes will be the topics of subsequent columns. ♦

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