How do you deal with overwhelm?

You're grappling with something you want done but it's not going well. As time is passing and your worried thoughts mount, you seem to be progressing less and less. Now you're too scared to stop trying even as you see your efforts turn *counterproductive*. Yikes! Overwhelm! How do you stop its oppressive spiral?

Bring in compassion



When trying hard and your efforts are "going nowhere", it can be unsettling. Some people push through it. The *sensitive* souls will feel distressed or despairing.

As a sensitive, you "sink" because you so want to be able to trust yourself to take care of your priority but you don't know how. You then start doubting *if* you can.

Before you conclude anything, though, please invite compassion into this situation. In an overwhelmed state your nervous system is a lot like a poorly hedgehog found disoriented in the daylight. If you want to help it, you need to intervene very gently or it'll shield itself from the very support it needs.

Compassionate response is about suspending negative thoughts and sending attention to register how you really are and what's important to you deep down. It's about allowing your system to calm and reorient towards internal truth rather than internal torment.

Current brain science confirms that compassionate response is not just kind, it's what you need to begin to turn your overwhelm around.

Sustainment is different from diagnosis

When an overwhelmed client asked for help, she couldn't think straight anymore. She longed to work again after a three-year break but wasn't even able to complete her CV.

Seeing that first step not happening, she worried she was "not confident enough". As she couldn't shake off the worry, her attempts kept faltering even as she tried harder.

You too may have responded to yourself with scary thoughts about what your overwhelm "means". It's a common reaction in cultures which address difficulties by focusing on "what's wrong".

What's *sustaining,* however, is a different matter. You need something that's capable of de-escalating your state so that your innate intelligence can do its job of generating helpful solutions.

Consider where you *can* find hope

As my client sat back and started to recap, she was flooded with painful feelings. One by one, I reflected back both the feeling and what it showed she was longing for. The more she connected with her needs, instead of her "conclusions", the more her body and voice relaxed. Her inner "processor" was starting over.

Like my client, you may be fortunate to discover that overwhelm in itself is not the problem. A natural, healthy response to overstimulation, its job is to guard you against overthinking and overdoing. When that guard stops you in your tracks, you'll do well to use it as an opportunity:

> **Pause and direct your attention where you can hope to experience fulfilment instead of losing yourself where your intense thoughts are pressing you to go.**

Go for compassionate reception and, you'll experience space where solutions emerge from within. As my client stepped into being received, she suddenly saw that she hadn't at all considered the value of what she would be bringing to her employers. Surprised, energised, she felt free to make her job applications.

Three steps to move on from in-the-moment overwhelm

1. Catch it early, know your warning signs

The quicker you respond to overwhelm, the easier it will be to take care of it. Long term, you'll need to de-stimulate your lifestyle. As a first aid tool, make a prompt card to help you pause for self-care. **For example:**

I pause to regroup as soon as I notice myself:

* **working harder while liking what's resulting less and less**
* **holding my breath**
* **getting confused and foggy in my thinking**
* **tensing up the body and keeping it that way even if it's painful**
* **get very worried or panicky inside about what's happening**

2. Shift your attention away from "what's wrong?" and onto compassionate check in

When you notice yourself getting stuck in a cycle of self-critical, pessimistic thoughts, it's your cue to shift focus. Pause and check in with your feelings and needs:

(a) Guide your attention by putting your hand on your heart and ask: "How am I right now?"

Example: "Let's see. My shoulders are screaming at me and my neck is tense. I'm hardly breathing. Feeling really confused and panicky. Wow, that's intense! Oh, a bit easier now though."

(b) Lower your hand to the belly and ask: "If I did what I'm trying to do, what would I get? What am I longing to experience in this situation? What is my heart wanting here?"

Listen out for a deep, felt truth, not clever truth such as "shoulds". If you're not certain you got there, ask a deepening question: "And if that happened, what would it give me inside?" Keep asking and listening what arises until you sense a gentle shift.

Example: "So, first I want some ease!!! I'd love to feel calm enough to see what's good to do instead of this madness. But I want to complete this thing because, because... well, so I feel okay, well more than that, I want to be able to do something worthwhile. Hm, and what would that give me? I'd feel easy, at peace with myself. I would actually want to be here, in this world. Yeah, that's it: I want peaceful, joyful participation in life, as me. Phew!"

3. Choose a task you can do easily



When ready, ease yourself into the flow of activity with an action that's *very* doable and yet expresses the beauty of what you discovered (in step 2) i.e. your precious needs. Choose other actions, later, with the same criteria: easy doability and relevance to what matters to you. **For example:**

"I'll sweep the floor and focus on enjoying it. I'll experience the movements as my love of order. Yeah! I want to feel the freedom to contribute something of "me" to the family. Then, I'll return to work but in timed ten-minute chunks."

A final note. Please practice these steps with lesser cases of overstimulation. It just isn't fair to expect yourself to learn in the middle of overwhelm ☺ Take small, compassionate steps towards your feelings and needs and you will get yourself back on your feet again. Gently does it!



I help people with sensitive disposition to turn around a personal challenge with a loved one, with someone at work or with oneself, where there is an inner struggle. Bristol/Bath, UK and online.

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