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THE KEY TO MANAGING OVERWHELM: SHOOT THE ARSONIST

People regularly tell us that life is full, very busy and rife with opportunities for stress and overwhelm. Media reports confirm that contemporary lifestyles are stressful, people routinely bite off more than they can chew, and anyone with a new idea for managing the frenzy will have a path beaten to his door. A friend of ours, a manager in a large corporation, once told us that he and his staff were “too busy putting out fires to stop and shoot the arsonist.” This is a good definition of “overwhelm” -- so much to do that the brain “jams” and there’s no end in sight.

WHAT IS “OVERWHELM?”

Being overwhelmed is a state of mind, not a set of facts. (If you doubt that this is so, think of the many times you have had more to do than you logically had time to do it in, and yet did NOT experience being overwhelmed!) Overwhelm occurs when we suddenly no longer see how we can fulfill on what we have set out to accomplish. When life is no longer “do-able,” there is often an accompanying emotional and psychological distress of one sort or another -- anything from anger to hopelessness. We are left thinking that there is no way through, or that we simply can’t get it all done. Moreover, we see this situation not only as our state of mind but as “the truth.” We think that the situation is hopeless and we react accordingly.

There is another possible way to view this phenomenon of overwhelm: Fundamentally, ***overwhelm is the absence of a plan.*** When everything there is to do is jumbled in your mind, and the solutions for dealing with it all are not formulated or not clear, the resulting uncertainty becomes a source of pain. Everything seems to grow larger; it all seems to multiply each time we think about it; and, we think about it constantly. In this state, we lack the ability to remember what is truly important, identify distinct actions to take or select the actions that will make the biggest difference.

Being overwhelmed is a state of mind, not a set of facts.

The secret to managing -- and even eliminating -- overwhelm does not lie in how much there is to do. There’s always lots to do. When we stop to think about it, our object in life is NOT really to “catch up.” “Catching up” is unlikely, unless we stop inventing -- living -- life.

Rather, our objective is to make choices that continually give us a sense of satisfaction and peace of mind.

As wise ones have said, "life is a dance." In this dance, or flow, of life, we invite you to consider yourself a "channel" rather than a "vessel" for all the content of life.

Managing overwhelm also is not a function of how much time we have. Though this is likely the topic of another newsletter, we suggest that "time" is like "gravity" -- a physical construct within which we design life. There is little to gain by bemoaning the limitations that either time or gravity place upon us. They are simply the "givens" of life, and provide a framework for our design.

Basically, managing overwhelm is about managing our own thoughts and about giving ourselves what we need to be empowered. This means, at the very least, being able to see that we have planned a life that is do-able, or a schedule that we can win at, or a path that allows for joy and satisfaction.

WHAT TO DO

So, when overwhelm occurs, here's what to do: First, stop -- and BREATHE. This step will usually seem counterintuitive. After all, if we're so busy that we feel overwhelmed, the thing to do seems to be go faster, to avoid stopping. Stopping is beneficial, however, because it will interrupt the stream of thoughts about being overwhelmed and allow you to step back, examine what is really needed, and to plan.

Second, make a complete written list of what needs to be done and by when it needs to be done. Be specific.

Third, identify the key actions to take to give yourself some mental "room" right away, allowing you to think and act even more effectively. Such actions may include handling true emergencies, rescheduling certain promised deadlines, asking for assistance or delegating particular tasks.

Fourth, create a master plan. Creating a plan means ranking things to do in terms of importance and urgency and then scheduling all actions. Creating a plan for EVERYTHING before tackling ANYTHING will give you peace of mind, the ability to focus, and the freedom to address things in proper order. Eliminating overwhelm means being able to answer the question, "How will this get handled?" and then to get into action, assured that you are doing exactly the right thing.

Finally, get to work. Do the next thing, and then the next thing, then the next thing. As a corollary to this step, forgive yourself. Deny yourself the indulgence of self-

invalidation, and focus on the future and on what there is to accomplish. Stay in action, knowing that you are doing exactly the right piece of work and in the right order.

Managing Overwhelm

- Stop and breathe
- Make a master list of actions
- Identify key actions
- Create a plan
- Take action
- Measure success
- Keep breathing!

CONCLUSION

Overwhelm is a state of mind. It doesn't result from too much to do or from too little time. Overwhelm is the absence of a plan. The antidote: Determine your priorities -- what is truly important -- and then design the actions to take and the order in which to take them. Then, "just do it!"

Saying No -- Heading Overwhelm Off at the Pass

An inability to say "no" has been identified as one of the five biggest time wasters -- along with being a slave to every telephone call, procrastinating, spreading yourself too thin and refusing to delegate.

Decline a request? This can be a difficult proposition, especially if our own sense of self-worth is tied to being "super person" or if we fear losing the regard of the person making the request.

Saying "no" does not mean being "negative" or losing your reputation as a team player. There are times when a friendly "no" may be an appropriate response.

"No" does not need to signify a break in relationship. It doesn't mean, "never ask me again." It is just "no." A handy word in any vocabulary.

10 Commandments for Reducing Stress

1. Thou shalt not be perfect, or even try to be.
2. Thou shalt not try to be all things to all people.
3. Thou shalt sometimes leave things undone that ought to be done.
4. Thou shalt not spread thyself too thinly.

5. Thou shalt learn to say “no.”
6. Thou shalt schedule time off for thyself and for thy supportive network.
7. Thou shalt switch off and do nothing regularly.
8. Thou shalt be boring, untidy, inelegant, and unattractive at times.
9. Thou shalt not even feel guilty
10. Especially, thou shalt not be thine own worst enemy, but be thine own best friend.

– *Anonymous*

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