



Overcome the Overwhelm

Relief Right Now | By Ginny Lang

First, before anything else, know this: If you're feeling overwhelmed, you are not alone!

Second, realize that overwhelm is a *perspective*.

In nearly every survey of all kinds of nonprofit professionals and board members, the number-one challenge they report is too much to do and not enough time to get it done. It's not limited to the nonprofit sector, is it? Everyone, in every kind of business and in everyday life, feels overwhelmed sometimes. I do. You do. Especially now, as our world changes so fast. I have worked with hundreds of people in organizations and as individuals and found a few basic remedies that almost always help right away.

Being overwhelmed can lead to paralysis, that "deer in the headlights" feeling where instead

of gearing up to get more done, we shut down, accomplishing less and less. That just feeds the sense of being overwhelmed and we're in a relentless, draining cycle.

The million-dollar question: How can I begin to overcome the overwhelm right NOW?

By changing your perspective.

Breathe. Read on. Here are 4 tips that form the basis of overcoming overwhelm. This will get you started to easing the pressure in the short term. In fact, right now, today.

Tip #1: I can do that!

I can do that!

Years ago—and several times since—I've read Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Between readings I persist in thinking of it as a book about writing. Then I get into it, begin to laugh out loud and remember that it's a book about everything.

She writes, "Thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written... and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder and said, "Bird by bird, buddy, just take it bird by bird." A great book. It's funny, provocative and helpful, each and every time I read it.

It turns out, that advice really does work for everything. **Focus on one small task at a time. Get that success under your belt before you move on to another one.** If you look at a whole project at once—a whole fundraising appeal, a whole event, a whole volunteer recruitment plan, it's too big. If you're like me, you get panicky and you get paralyzed. Now you can't even begin because you're focused not on what you must do now, but on everything you have to do.

Go ahead and make your list for all week or all month—then breathe and change your perspective...pick one thing. All you have to do right now is that one thing. Write that thank you note. Answer that email. Write that invitation. Seems simple, huh? But it works. Pretty soon they add up and you've made a big dent in your to-do list!

Approach tasks in small increments. One success at a time feeds the next one.

Tip #2: Forget Perfection

Know what? Nothing is perfect.

One of my favorite quotes comes from a Leonard Cohen song: “Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

Nothing is *meant* to be perfect, probably ever, and certainly not on the first try. It’s easy to get stuck, paralyzed even, because there’s one more revision, one more piece of information, one more graphic or photo or re-recording , “before I can show this to anyone” or “before I can turn this in.” If you obsess, you will stress, the project will churn, and you will achieve overwhelm – fast! Here’s one strategy (among many) that can help:

The sloppy first draft. Just go for it. Get all the thoughts, or all the numbers, or all the images, references, methods or designs, out of your head or your file and onto the screen or the paper. A Brain Drain! Let it pour. Include stuff you like but think you’ll never use. It might come in handy later. Don’t worry if it’s too long or sloppy or downright terrible. It’s supposed to be terrible the first time. And it’s not stuck in your head anymore! It will get better when you revisit it. It will get even better when you send it past another person and then revise it again. Will it ever be perfect? Probably not, but it will be good, better than you think, you’ll have a product that you can be proud of, and it won’t be churning around in your head, stressing you out.

Start with a sloppy first draft to get out of your head. Then strive for completion—and perfection will take care of itself.

Tip #3: React Against the Grain

When we get overwhelmed, we often react in ways that just make it worse.

Do you know what makes you feel better when you’re stressed? Of course, you do. The list probably includes things like taking a walk, reading a book, watching a movie or TV episode, talking to a friend, writing or drawing, listening to, or playing music, taking a hot bath, or (one of my favorites) just sitting by the ocean, a lake, stream or fountain and watching the water shimmer and change. Being kind to yourself.

But often, that’s not what we do. “Holy cow! Are you kidding? I’ve got too much to do—I can’t

take any time off to play!” Sound familiar? We work harder. We buckle down and increase the time we’re spending at work. We think and plan and stare at the screen. We look harder and longer at all the things piling up. We toss and turn at night.

And the stress mounts.

So this tip may go against the grain of your immediate reaction, but it’s essential to easing your overwhelm feelings right now and giving you some relief:

LOOK UP from your desk. **UNPLUG** from your to-do list. **DOUBLE UP** on taking care of you.

We also know from many studies that we learn and work better in shorter increments. That 8-hour marathon of working won’t turn out your best product.

Do you usually walk for a half hour? Take an hour. There’s scientific proof that our brains recharge best in nature. Read a chapter of fiction? Read two. Watch an old favorite episode of *Frasier* so you can laugh at Niles and Eddie? Watch an extra episode or two. Call a friend you haven’t talked to in a long time and chat. Draw a bubble bath, quiet your mind and relax your body. Listen to your favorite music. Stake out that bench beside the lake and let the shimmers of sun on water hypnotize you for a while. Write, sketch, collage, cook or sing.

Do it deliberately every day for a week. Choose one thing or mix it up. Schedule your unplugged time like a date with yourself and don’t cancel. Put aside your phone and computer for a little while. Ignore the panicked voice that’s urging you to get back to your desk—it will go away. Seriously. Your desk will still be there when you’re ready to come back to it and you’ll find that you’re in much, much better shape to revisit your tasks and challenges. You may even be inspired with new ideas for approaching that project or problem. It won’t weigh nearly as much as you thought it did.

React against the grain and schedule a date with yourself away from work when you’re busiest. It will give you the renewed energy to bring back to your tasks—without the Overwhelm.

Tip #4: Ditch the Old Stuff

Get rid of old habits that sabotage your peace of mind.

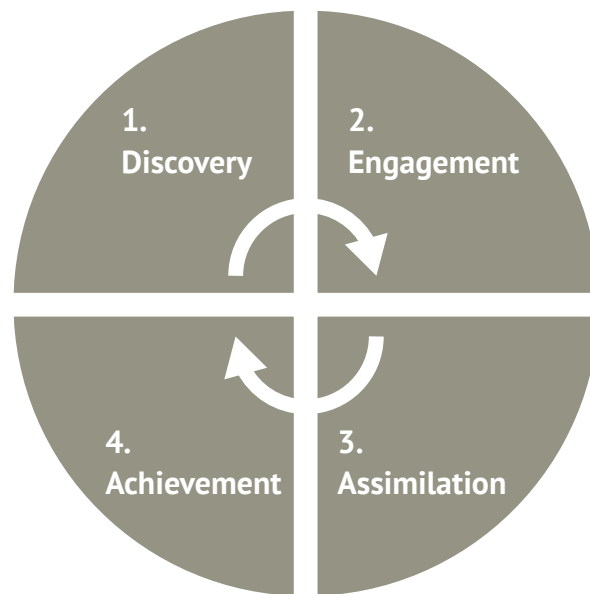
We all have *stuff*, behaviors and habits that we wish we didn’t and that we can’t seem to get

rid of. Do you procrastinate? Micromanage? Insist on perfection? When we get overwhelmed, it's easy to sink into actions that block our progress.

Here's a formula that can make you aware of what's triggering the overwhelm that happens to everyone. If you see it coming, you can meet it with some of the strategies we've already looked at.

Every single time we start a project or learn a new skill, we go through 4 Levels of effort or learning. They are:

1. Discovery: I want to do/learn this
2. Engagement: I'm into this now and I have a long way to go
3. Assimilation: I'm seeing progress and getting comfortable with this
4. Achievement: I know how to do this and I can finish it up



- Level 1: Discovery—you don't know what to expect from the process and you're probably excited to start something new. So no problem. No Overwhelm.
- *Level 2: Engagement—Let's dive into this one because that's where the Overwhelm starts. Because at this point, you have learned just enough to sabotage yourself. You realize that you have so much more to learn and understand. Things can get messy. Suddenly you're Overwhelmed! This level is the gap between where you are and where you want to be. Resistance kicks in. You feel trapped, panicky—and you react. Probably in one of these predictable ways:*
 - *“I'm too busy. I don't have time to ___.” (avoidance)*

- “I’ll get to it later.” (procrastination)
- “This is not my thing.” (losing interest)
- “I meant to do that, but I forgot” (selective memory)
- “I just can’t do this” (stressed and paralyzed)
- “This is taking WAY too long!” (impatient)
- “Yeah, but...!” (all kinds of inaction)

Look familiar? Sure does to me!

This is predictable. You can learn to know the signs and how it manifests for you. Recognize and examine the behaviors that keep you stressed, that keep you from achieving—and DITCH THEM! Change your perspective.

Use the first 3 tips. If you continue to work in little steps, from wherever you are, at your own pace, being kind to yourself, pretty soon—(sooner than you think) you arrive at

- Level 3: Assimilation—You have multiple “aha” moments and the puzzle starts to make a picture. You begin to realize that you can learn this or do this after all --and you pass through, out of the Overwhelm and into
- Level 4: Achievement—Eureka! This is possible, it’s familiar, it gets easier and easier, smoother and smoother. Until you have a skill you use easily and effectively or a task you can call complete.

Again, we all go through these stages with every new project, task and creation. Knowing they are predictable helps us recognize them and ditch the reactions when they land us in the Overwhelm. The key is to calm down and push through Level 2 into 3, little by little. The ONLY way out is through—or you don’t get where you set out to go.

These tips will get you started to move out of stress and overwhelm.

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