



TYPES OF ANXIETY:  
OVERWHELM

# Overwhelm

Overwhelm occurs when the demands being placed upon us exceed our ability to cope with them. We can be overwhelmed intellectually, organizationally, or emotionally. Generally speaking, overwhelm happens under one of three circumstances:

- (1) We have too much to do and a limited time in which to do it. This is what most of us experience as a 'time crunch';
- (2) We have an enormous task to complete (such as a project or an assignment) and we don't know where to begin;
- (3) We are trying to cope emotionally or psychologically with a difficult personal situation while simultaneously trying to deal with a high level of academic demand.

When you are overwhelmed you are likely to experience one or more of the following:

## *On an emotional level:*

- A high level of anxiety
- Increased stress
- Emotional numbing out
- Irritability or anger with other people, or in general, for no apparent reason
- Emotions that are close to the surface, such as sadness or tearfulness
- A sense of being overloaded, swamped, deluged, or drowning
- A feeling of powerlessness or helplessness to deal effectively with your situation

## *On an intellectual level:*

- A racing mind
- Difficulty focusing or concentrating on any one thing
- A feeling of mental paralysis; an inability to 'think straight'
- The experience of trying to work on one thing while your mind is simultaneously thinking about all of the other things that you also need to get done

## *On a behavioural level:*

- Avoidance of doing work so as not to have the feeling of overwhelm
- Running around trying to get everything done that needs to get done but not doing anything particularly well

If your overwhelm goes on for an extended period of time, you will likely start to experience worsening fatigue, exhaustion, reduced productivity levels, physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach upset, and a deteriorating ability to cope emotionally. This occurs for the simple reason that our bodies

and minds have been taxed at too high a level for too long and need a rest. As a result, we begin to experience a level of exhaustion commonly known as “burnout”.

It is important to note that we all get overwhelmed at times and for different reasons. Fortunately, there is a lot you can do to reduce overwhelm. In this chapter we’ll discuss concrete practical, academic, and personal strategies for reducing overwhelm before, during, and after the more stressful academic times of the year.

## Ana’s Story

Ana is a third year Political Science major. She has been a high achiever all her life. Ana has always been active with extracurricular activities and done well in school. Ana enjoys being engaged and involved in things, and has an ongoing need to be busy. She has experienced periods of high stress and overwhelm at peak times throughout High School and in University. Recently, however, Ana has experienced a lengthier period of overwhelm that—for the first time in her life—is interfering in her ability to function. Ana is enrolled in 5 courses, volunteers at the Peer Support Centre, works part-time as a lifeguard 10 hours per week, and is on the Varsity Gymnastics Team. She has begun having difficulty concentrating and has 4 essays due in the next 3 weeks. Even when she has time to work on her papers she finds she gets overwhelmed, doesn’t know where to start, and can’t begin to organize herself. Her feeling of stress and overwhelm is increasing as each day goes by and she is unable to get almost any work done. Lately, she has begun to feel exhausted; she noticed she is drinking more coffee than usual and is experiencing low energy during the day, which is reducing her productivity further. Ana has thoughts like “I have to get everything done”, “I have to hurry up”, “I’m so behind”, “I should be able to do this”, and “I have to be productive at all times”.

## Ben's Story

Ben is a first year Engineering student. He has always worked hard in order to do well in school, and has many friends. Ben was excited to come to Queen's, is enjoying Res, and has made new friends. Ben has found adjusting to academics at the University level quite challenging; both the volume and difficulty of the work have been much greater and, therefore, more challenging compared with High School. Ben had been struggling to keep up and do the work but was learning to manage by developing some new study skills, such as joining a study group. At Thanksgiving, Ben and his girlfriend of two years mutually decided to break up, and his grandfather passed away. When Ben returned to Queen's after Thanksgiving, he found himself feeling upset and was preoccupied with thoughts of both his ex-girlfriend and his grandfather. Ben found it very difficult to focus enough to do his work. He began to feel overwhelmed with the work that was piling up and the material that he did not understand. Ben began engaging in avoidance behaviours in order to protect himself from feelings of overwhelm. He spent more and more time playing computer games, and missed several quizzes and short assignments. Heading into his December final exams, Ben felt totally overwhelmed. His grades had already suffered, and, most concerning of all, Ben was way behind in studying for his exams. Ben was afraid that, for the first time in his life, he might not pass some of his finals. He still felt great difficulty being able to focus, and was beginning to feel powerless to deal with the academic mountain of work in front of him. Ben had thoughts like "I can't do this," "I might fail," and "I just want to give up."

## *Looking Ahead*

It can be enormously helpful to plan ahead in order to ward off overwhelm during more demanding times to come. For most University students, overwhelm is more likely to occur at key times in the year, notably midterms, end of term, and heading into final fall- and spring-time exams. Of course, depending on your own personal circumstances, you may feel overwhelm at other times as well. Here are some proactive steps that you can take early in the term (or even during the summer months, looking to the academic year ahead) to reduce your overwhelm later on:

# *1. Make a Schedule.*

Making a schedule and following it is the single best way to stay on top of your academics. It helps protect you from getting behind on your readings, studying, and assignments, thereby preventing you from hitting a wall of overwhelm that comes when trying to write multiple essays at the last minute or cram for an exam the night before.

See the section on Time Management in Basic Anxiety Management Skills for more information about scheduling your time (page 30). Alternatively, you can visit the Queen's University Learning Strategies website for helpful scheduling tips and strategist, or to make an appointment to meet one-one-one with a Learning Strategist at Learning Strategies in Student Academic Success Services in the Stauffer library (see their contact information in the list of Resources in Appendix A).

## ***Examples:***

When Ana made up her term schedule, she realized that she couldn't possibly do everything she had committed to do. Ana used the schedule template as a guide to help her to set a limit on what she could take on and what she couldn't.

Ben met with a Learning Strategist when he returned to campus in January and created a term schedule for himself. Having a plan in place for how his work was going to get done was enormously relieving. Because Ben was calmer and less overwhelmed, he was able to think more clearly and grasp the material more easily, getting work done in a shorter amount of time. Ben also felt increased motivation to do his work, and stopped avoiding study time.

Setting up a schedule for yourself in September or January can be enormously helpful in keeping your academic stress and overwhelm at more manageable levels throughout the term. As an added bonus, you might see your grades improve as well!

# *2. Practice Good Self Care*

Remember "SPEMS" from the Basic Anxiety Management Skills section (Page 4)? Good Self Care involves attending to our social, physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs. We need to make room to meet these deep needs in our lives or we will not have the energy or resources to meet the significant demands placed upon us. When we are depleted in one or more of these areas we will be more vulnerable to overwhelm and, subsequently, burnout. It is crucial to keep our bodies, minds, and selves energized, vibrant and healthy.

What does this mean? It means ensuring that we are getting approximately 8 hours of sleep a night, eating regular healthy snacks and meals throughout the day, engaging in moderate exercise, making time to spend with supportive friends or family, and finding ways to nourish ourselves emotionally.

Don't overlook one important aspect of Self Care: DOING NOTHING. You need to make time to do nothing at regular intervals in order to keep stress levels down by giving your body and mind a chance to recover from stress. You will be more productive when you return to your work if you do this. Finally, doing nothing affords us the opportunity to follow our bliss or to do something just because we feel like it; a luxury in our highly structured lives where there is so much that we *have* to get done every day.

When we have a lot that we need to do, or are in a state of stress or overwhelm, our tendency is to neglect our basic needs in order to get the things done that we need to get done. This is a crucial mistake: **The more demands placed upon us, the more we need to be engaging in good Self Care.** Of course we all drop the ball on our Self Care sometimes. However, it's important that if you do, you resume these activities as soon as possible and not neglect them for prolonged periods of time. Remember, too, that caring for yourself will boost your productivity and your ability to perform academically, as our brains work better when our bodies and selves are well cared for. The time spent on yourself in these areas is time well spent.

#### ***Examples.***

Ana realized that she had almost no time available for Self Care, personal time, or time to do nothing. On some days, Ana didn't even leave herself enough time to eat! Ana committed to booking time in her schedule for SPEMS in order to re-balance her life and live in a state of wellness. She realized that she couldn't keep on driving herself like this without her academics starting to fall apart.

Ben had previously been very good about working out regularly at the gym. However, when he became overwhelmed, he stopped going. Ben made the commitment to resume and maintain his workouts three times per week throughout the term.

Remember to block all of your Self Care activities into your Weekly Schedule (including doing nothing!). This is one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself: committing to and prioritizing taking care of YOU first.

On the lines below write down two things that you are good at maintaining with regards to your Self Care:

*I am good at the following Self Care strategies...*

1.

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2.

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On the lines below write down two Self Care priorities that you could either introduce or be more consistent with that could help reduce anxiety and prevent overwhelm:

*Two Self Care strategies I would like to prioritize include...*

1.

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2.

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Now, book all four of these items into your weekly schedule for the remainder of the term. Commit to maintaining them. Over the course of the term, notice how practicing regular Self Care helps your anxiety/stress, physical well-being, emotions, and productivity level.

### *3. Practice Other Basic Anxiety Management Skills:*

The same techniques we teach people for anxiety are very effective at warding off the effects of everyday stress and overwhelm. Deep Breathing, Mindfulness, and Relaxation have been shown to be highly effective in helping us manage our stress levels. Experiment and see what best helps you to reduce your feelings of overwhelm.

Briefly review the sections on Breathing, Grounding/Mindfulness, Yoga, Progressive Muscle Relaxation, and Thought Records in the Basic Anxiety Management Skills chapter (Page10).

On the lines below, write down two Basic Anxiety Management Skills that you will practice for one term:

***Examples:***

I will practice abdominal breathing once a day at bedtime.  
I will attend one yoga class per week.

*Two Basic Anxiety Management Skills I will practice for one term include...*

1.

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2.

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Notice over the course of the term how these practices affect your anxiety/stress, physical well-being, emotions, and productivity level.

**Assess Yourself: What Tends to Put Me Into Overwhelm?**

Take some time early in the term to consider what it is that tends to make you personally vulnerable to overwhelm. First, we'll review some common contributing causes for students. Then you'll have a chance to reflect on yourself

## 4. Do You Overcommit Yourself?

### **Example.**

For Ana, overwhelm was the result of overcommitting herself. On top of her schoolwork, Ana was volunteering, participating in extracurricular activities, and working a part-time job. Ana realized that she wasn't being realistic about how much time and energy she actually had to dedicate to her various activities in addition to her academics. She came to understand that **anyone** would become overwhelmed with a plate this overloaded.

Always keep in mind that being enrolled in five courses *is a full-time job in and of itself*. Queen's students are known for being engaged, involved, and active students—which is great—as long as it's within a healthy range. Past that point, once you are in overwhelm you aren't much good to yourself or to anybody else. You need to take care of yourself, too.

If, like Ana, you tend to get overwhelmed by overcommitting, try the following:

1. **Make space for your own needs.** People who overcommit tend to deny their own needs. When we do this chronically, we get burned out. When are you going to eat? Sleep? Exercise? Spend time with friends? Do nothing? Ask yourself, how do you want to feel in your life? Stressed, rushed, overloaded, chaotic, disorganized, running from one thing to the next? Or more relaxed, grounded, able to laugh and enjoy your life, calmer, on top of things, confident that things will get done, with time to also do things you *like* to do?
2. **Consider your priorities at this time.** Set priorities or goals and evaluate requests made of you in relation to those priorities. No matter how interesting a given opportunity might be, ask yourself, does this activity align with my personal goals right now? For example, if your priority is to increase your grades in order to apply to Grad school, then you will want to make more time for your academic work. That will necessitate that you reduce the amount of time you are dedicating to other commitments. Similarly, if a volunteer commitment is in the same area that you intend to pursue as a career, you may want to prioritize making time for that commitment, and something else will have to go.
3. **Be thoughtful about what you commit to.** Really take time before you say yes to evaluate the merits of each opportunity. Think about what this commitment will actually require of your time and energy. Be realistic. Think ahead. It's easy to feel enthusiastic about an opportunity in the first week of September but how will this be for you at crunch time when midterms arrive, not to mention at end of term and heading into exams? How busy are you going to choose to be? At the more extreme end, is it possible that being this busy could jeopardize something in your life, like your grades, your relationship(s), or your health?

4. **Feel entitled to say yes or no.** Be assertively in charge of your life choices. Take the driver’s seat of your life. Be protective of your time and health. Put your highest best interest first before committing to anything. If an activity isn’t a clear “yes” according to these criteria, then consider saying no. If you are ambivalent or concerned about something you are taking on and you can’t resolve your concern, say no. For help saying no, consider Sean’s example in the Behaviour Experiment Basic Skill (page 44).

Listen to your own deepest needs, have your own back, and stand for your own highest interests. Be very realistic about what and how much you can commit to. No matter how high your enthusiasm is, or how badly others want you to be involved in something, you need to take stock of the rest of your life too, and where and how this new opportunity will fit in.

Do you overcommit yourself? On the lines below, list the top two ways in which you get pulled in to overcommit. Note that this Worksheet is also available in Appendix B (Worksheet 6.1 Overwhelm: Overcommitting Yourself). For example, is it hard for you to say no? Are you a time optimist—always thinking you’ll have more time available than you do? Is it hard for you to be assertive about your own life priorities? Do you feel as though you always need to be there for others or can’t let others down? What specifically gets you emotionally “hooked in” to overcommit?

*Two ways I overcommit are...*

1.

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2.

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Next, write down two small steps you could take this term to let go of, or challenge, your “emotional hooks” and reduce your overwhelm down the road. For example, “I will remind myself that it’s not my job to meet everyone else’s needs,” “I will say no to requests to cover other people’s shifts from mid-October onwards this term,” “I will cut out one of my extracurricular activities that isn’t aligned with the priorities I’ve set for myself this academic year.”

*Two ways I can let go of overcommitting...*

1.

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2.

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## 5. Do You Avoid?

***Example.***

When Ben became overwhelmed academically, his coping strategy was to engage in a pattern of avoidance in order to reduce feelings of overwhelm. As Ben did so, his academic situation grew worse and worse as work continued to pile up, and he became more and more behind. Ben realized that he needed to challenge this pull to avoid in the future and be more active and assertive in dealing with difficulties when they arose in his life.

Avoidance is a common coping strategy that people employ—often without realizing it—in the face of overwhelm. If opening your textbook floods you with feelings of anxiety and overwhelm, isn’t it easier in the moment to go for a coffee, answer a friend’s text, or go play a computer game for a while? As we talked about in the chapter on Generalized Anxiety, avoidance gives short-term relief but creates a snowball effect of problems in the medium- and long-term, which only serves to increase your anxiety and overwhelm further. Most of us avoid sometimes. But when avoidance becomes a pattern for managing stress or overwhelm, it can start to have negative effects on our lives.

Here are some strategies for challenging avoidance:

- Practice **Mindful Awareness** of your internal pull to avoid. Notice the powerful emotional draw to escape feelings of overwhelm, and to distract yourself with another activity (see Mindfulness on page 18).
- Rather than the escapism of avoidance, **challenge yourself to stop and face the situation directly**. Breathe. Come up with a plan for how to deal with what is happening in reality. Remind yourself that, as difficult as it might feel, you will feel so much better if you deal with the issue head-on rather than letting things fester and worsen over time. Reach out for help. People who avoid tend to go off alone to deal with their difficulties.
- **Ask a friend** to help you with a problem set you don't understand. Go talk to your professor. Make an appointment in Counselling Services to deal with personal difficulties or go to Learning Strategies to put an academic plan in place.

Use the worksheet on the following page (and in Appendix B). In the Worksheet 6.2 Overwhelm: Avoiding, list two things that you tend to do to avoid in the first column, and what the consequences of those are in the second.

***Example.***

Avoidance Behaviour: I hang out with my housemates  
Effect: I don't study when I should be studying

Next, in the third column, write down two strategies you will begin using this term to resist the urge to avoid:

***Example.***

I will go to the library to study where there are fewer distractions  
I will limit my computer time to one hour per day after my work is completed.

## WORKSHEET 6.2 Overwhelm: Avoiding

Avoidance Behaviour	Effect	How I will Resist the Urge to Avoid

Overcoming avoidance can increase your stress in the short-term. However, as you practice being more assertive and engaged, you will feel stronger, more confident, and more emotionally present—in short, more alive—in your life. And you will develop and build important life skills that will enhance your work and your relationships going forward.

### *6. Do You Struggle Academically?*

When you have an academic difficulty or challenge, you are more vulnerable to overwhelm for the simple reason that you have more to overcome in order to get your work done.

Some of the common academic difficulties that people encounter include the following (see if you recognize yourself anywhere on this list):

- It's difficult for you to organize yourself. You work in chaos, usually completing assignments at the last minute when you realize they are due.
- You find it hard to get motivated. You procrastinate during the term, hanging out during your days, and then you have to learn large amounts of new material heading into midterms or final exams.
- You have difficulty writing essays; you feel you never really learned the skills you need to write easily or well.
- You are in first year, or a later more challenging year, and like Ben in the case example above, you are trying to get used to the increased volume and difficulty of work. Perhaps you are also getting used to working independently and having to be so responsible for your learning compared with High School.

- Your study habits need updating. You don't have a study strategy, you don't take breaks, you are a perfectionist who tries to learn every detail versus focusing in on important material, you are easily distracted when somebody calls or texts you.
- You have a learning disability that makes learning more challenging than someone else as smart as you.

Don't let academic difficulties become chronic. Take charge of your learning, and make life easier on yourself. Learning Strategies is an excellent resource for developing better skills, from improving motivation, to studying 'smarter not harder'. Don't try to soldier on alone. Make life easier on yourself by being proactive and learning some new ways of doing things.

If you have a learning disability, make an appointment with Disability Services (See Appendix A for Contact information). Staff there can advise you whether you qualify for accommodations or specialized learning tools. Also, Learning Strategies offers many adaptive strategies that can be helpful to counteract the challenges that a learning disability presents. Make an appointment with a Learning Strategist for help (Appendix A).

## *7. Is There a Personal Issue in Your Life that Needs Addressing?*

Recall that overwhelm can be emotional, as well as practical, or academic. When we are upset about something, we tend to think more about it, and it takes up more of our mental space to process or manage our feelings about whatever it is that's going on. This makes us more vulnerable to overwhelm, especially if we are also trying to deal with academic and our other life demands.

Are there longstanding patterns or personal situations in your life that are overloading you that need to be addressed in order to reduce your overwhelm? Here are some common situations that students face. See if any of these apply to you:

- Do you manage a mental health issue, such as depression? Are you taking steps to manage that, such as seeking out professional care, or following strategies that you've previously learned that work for you?
- Do you overfunction in your relationships? For example, are you the 'go to' person for your friends? Do friends consistently call only you for support when they're upset about something in their own lives to the extent that *you* are becoming upset or stressed? Do you spend time being there for them when you really need to be studying? Or are you taking a high level of responsibility for someone else's ongoing significant life problems? Seriously consider setting some limits on your availability in order to preserve your own well-being and reduce overwhelm. There's nothing wrong with supporting others, as long as it's not compromising your own health and ability to function. Consider setting limits on the time you spend providing

support to others, or suggest a friend in need make an appointment in Counselling Services for needed support.

- Do you have financial difficulties? Create a budget, or re-work an existing budget, speak with your parents, or go to the Queen's Financial Aid office for assistance (see Appendix A for contact information). University can place significant financial stresses on students, but remember that you are not alone. There are resources available to help!
- Do you deal with challenges in your immediate family, such as parental separation or conflicts in family relationships? Are there ways that you can protect yourself from the effects of your situation, by distancing yourself or setting limits? Consider making an appointment in Counselling Services for support.

It's crucial to determine how to change, manage, or set limits on ongoing personal matters so that you can do what you're here to do: study, get your degree, and have a positive, rich experience of your time here at Queen's.

On the lines below, write down a personal situation in your own life that tends to elevate your anxiety or overwhelm:

*One personal situation that heightens my anxiety...*

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Next, write down two things that you could do to reduce the negative effect of this on yourself. This could be a course of action, or it could be as simple as the decision to reach out for help:

*I can reduce the negative effect of the above personal situation by...*

1.

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2.

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# In The Weeds: What to do if you are Totally Overwhelmed

Even when we've made our best efforts to prevent overwhelm it can still happen to us for various reasons. In this section, we'll discuss some ideas for what to do if you are experiencing overwhelm.

## *Academic Overwhelm:*

If it is crunch time and you are hitting a wall of academic overwhelm:

First of all, breathe.

Next, stop, take a step back, and *make a plan*.

Strongly resist the urge to either avoid, or run around trying to get everything done all at once. Neither one of these coping approaches will help you if you are in over your head, for the reasons discussed above. Instead, put an Emergency Plan in place for yourself.

## *Creating an Emergency Plan:*

Lay out all of your work in front of you and take an honest look at all of your due dates and deadlines. Is there a *realistic* way that you can get all this work done? If so, how? Create Emergency Weekly and Term Schedules using the Learning Strategies templates and tips discussed above. Make a schedule by blocking in everything that you need to do. Decide on the order of priority for working on your assignments and studying based on due dates. Figure out a plan to complete one item at a time, then move on to the next. Scheduling time for each item will help your mind from racing ahead to all the other things you also need to work on. If your mind does start racing ahead, gently bring your focus and attention back to the work in front of you. Say to yourself, "I now choose to focus on one thing at a time".

When creating your Emergency Plan, ask yourself what you would need to remove from your life in order to get your work done. This is especially true if you tend to overcommit. Be creative and also be ruthless. For example, do you need to take a break from your volunteer commitment(s), cancel plans you have with friends, or cut back your hours at your part-time job? Remember that cutting things out can be temporary while you get through your period of overwhelm.

What do you need to remove from your plate in order to make your Emergency Plan work? Remember to be creative and ruthless. On the lines below, list two things you could remove from your schedule in order to be able to meet your academic deadlines.

*In order to make my Emergency Plan work, I need to remove the following...*

1.

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2.

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## *Being in Survival Mode*

When you are in academic overwhelm, it is sometimes helpful to think about yourself as being in **Survival Mode**. In the same way that you needed to make an Emergency Plan for meeting your academic demands, you also need to make an emergency plan for how to do some Self Care. The reality is that under the circumstances you don't have much time for Self Care or Basic Anxiety Management Skills. You do, however, need to do just enough of these to have the energy to be productive and to sufficiently reduce overwhelm so that you can think straight.

Ask yourself, what can you do for yourself that is the *most* impactful and *least* time-consuming that will deliver the biggest payoff for what your body and mind need right now? The bare minimum involves getting enough sleep and eating healthily and regularly through the day. In addition, getting even a minimum amount of exercise will be helpful. For example, maybe a 20 minute run in the morning twice a week is all you have time for right now but is just enough to get energy flowing in your body and to reduce your stress level. Note that creating a survival mode plan can also be found in Appendix B (Worksheet 6.3 Overwhelm: Survival Mode).

Being realistic with regards to everything you have to get done, what Self Care strategies can you focus on and prioritize in order to boost your productivity and reduce overwhelm?

*The Self Care strategies I can use right now include...*

1.

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2.

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Where can you strategically place these in your schedule to maximize their effectiveness and ensure they will get done?

*I can put the following in my schedule to maximize my effectiveness...*

1.

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2.

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If you are having difficulty creating a workable plan, make an appointment at Learning Strategies or Counselling Services to help you create and put a plan in place. If your academic situation is so serious as to warrant withdrawal or academic accommodation, or if you want more information about your options, speak with your professor or with an Academic Advisor in your program.

# *Some Further Ideas for Dealing with Academic Overwhelm:*

## Writing:

If you are overwhelmed with regards to an essay or a written assignment, try the following:

**Take a break.** Often times with writing, an idea will come to you when you aren't actually working on the paper, for example, when you are walking home from the library, grabbing a coffee, or getting out of the shower in the morning.

**Move away from your computer to write.** Instead, do some reading on the subject; input some new ideas and see what gets sparked. Or go sit somewhere else with a pen and paper and just brainstorm some rough ideas; often getting away from the felt pressure that comes when sitting at a computer screen can allow for ideas to flow.

**Make an appointment in The Writing Centre.** A Writing Consultant can help give you tips on how to start a paper, organize or re-organize a paper, or do a final edit to create a more polished essay. This can be enormously helpful to move things along, as well as to learn skills that will make writing essays easier in the future.

## Tests and Exams:

If you are overwhelmed preparing for a test or exam:

**Get organized.** Break course materials down into parts. Create a study schedule to review those parts.

**Visit the Learning Strategies Online Resources** web page for tips on how to study smarter not harder.

**Focus on key concepts.** Now is not the time to get bogged down by the fine details. If you focus your energy on understanding the key concepts, you will likely be able to deduce the finer details from your understanding of the material.

**Ask a friend for help.** Study with friends or a study group.

**Attend a Workshop at Learning Strategies.** Prior to each exam period, Learning Strategies runs specialized workshops, for example: "How to Prepare for Multiple Choice Exams", "How to Prepare for Math and Science Exams", "How to Prepare for Essay and Short Answer Exams".

If you are struggling academically, don't try to soldier on alone, doing what you've always done. Get help and support to get things done quicker, better, and easier. Learn new skills that will make things easier and reduce your overwhelm going forward.

## *If You are Overwhelmed by a Personal Issue:*

### **Example.**

Ben was just barely able to manage his academics; breaking up with his girlfriend and the death of his grandfather tipped Ben over into overwhelm.

If you are experiencing a personal difficulty or are feeling emotionally overwhelmed about a situation in your personal life, try the following:

**Backburner It.** If it is crunch time or you have pressing academic demands on you presently, see if there is a way that you can 'backburner' the issue. Backburnering means that you find a way to defer, delay, or put off dealing with a personal matter until after your academic deadlines are behind you.

### **Examples.**

You have been experiencing conflict in your relationship with your girlfriend. Since the arguments upset you and make it difficult for you to study, you decide you will not raise contentious issues with her until after your exams are over.

Your brother has been calling you for support about a difficult situation in his own life. You have two essays due and talking to him for an hour every night is seriously interrupting your ability to write. You tell your brother that you're very sorry but you need to focus on your essays for the next week. Is there someone else he could talk to about what he's dealing with?

An important aspect of the backburnering technique involves being able to put matters out of your mind as well so that you can concentrate on your work. Some people can do this fairly easily while others have a more difficult time with it. Of course, the ability to do this also depends on the seriousness of your circumstances. See if you can try putting ruminations and worry out of your mind when thoughts about your situation arise. Say "I now choose to focus on my work. I will deal with this issue in two weeks' time". Practicing the Backburnering technique can often be enormously relieving when feeling overwhelmed with academics *and* a personal matter at the same time. In addition, letting things sit can sometimes help put things into perspective when you do return to address the situation, or allow things to work themselves out without your intervention.

**Get support.** Is there someone you can talk to about your situation, such as a trusted friend or family member? It can be very helpful in reducing distress to tell someone else what's going on. It can be especially helpful to get advice or feedback from someone you respect who knows you well and cares about you. Choose someone safe who isn't going to judge you and who will keep the information confidential.

**Create An Outlet.** Make space to emotionally process what it is you are dealing with. Journaling can be very helpful to release pent up emotions and to gain insight or clarity about complex situations in our lives. Such a release can help you feel better emotionally, thereby reducing overwhelm to a lower level where things feel more manageable. Try to journal with the intent of releasing powerful emotion or moving towards more empowering ways of seeing your situation. Just remember to be mindful of *how* you journal; it should be used as a tool for *working through difficulties*, not *ruminating on issues*.

***Example.***

Ben talked to his best friend since childhood about the breakup. Just talking about it felt better, and he was reminded that other people in his life besides his ex-girlfriend are there for him and care about him. For the next few days Ben was better able to sit down and study.

## *Some Final Notes on Personal Overwhelm:*

If you experience a personal crisis or difficulty at any time, do not hesitate to contact Counselling Services to make an appointment to talk with a Personal Counsellor. If your personal situation is so serious as to warrant withdrawal or academic accommodation, or if you want more information about your options, speak with an Academic Advisor in your program, or make an appointment in Counselling Services.

## *Dealing with Your Thoughts:*

Review the section on Introducing the Thought Record in the Basic Anxiety Management Skills chapter (Page 4). Recall that the Thought Record is the tool that we use to neutralize anxious thoughts by critically questioning those thoughts. It can be very important to deal with one's thoughts when overwhelmed, as anxious thoughts are likely to be playing a role in our feeling of overwhelm, and weakening us from taking steps to act in our own best interest.

Let's look at Ana and Ben's Overwhelm Thought Records. Then, you can complete your own Overwhelm Thought Record, found in Appendix B (Worksheet 2.5ab Thought Record):

# Anxiety Thought Record: Ana

## WORKSHEET 2.5 Thought Record

1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions: (Select from list in box below)	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: (Use the questions below)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I have to get everything done.</li> <li>2. I have to hurry up.</li> <li>3. I'm so behind.</li> <li>4. I should be able to do <sup>this</sup></li> <li>5. I have to be productive at all times.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Focusing on only the negatives, Perfectionism</li> <li>5. Perfectionism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. I'm exactly where I need to be. I now choose to focus on how to go forward from here. I now calmly focus on creating workable solutions.</li> <li>5. I now choose to put my own needs in a place of priority in my life. I now make room for Self Care, enjoyment, and rest. I now choose to alternate being productive with downtime. I am more productive when I give myself downtime; having downtime is being productive.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</li> <li>• Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</li> </ul>	<p><b>2. Identify Thought Distortions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><u>Catastrophizing – focusing on the worst possible outcome</u></li> <li><u>Overestimating probability – of bad things happening</u></li> <li><u>Perfectionism – pressuring the self to be perfect: “I should..”</u></li> <li><u>Focusing on only the negatives – ignoring positives</u></li> <li><u>Predicting the future – how can you know what will happen?</u></li> <li><u>Generalizing – ignoring differences in circumstances</u></li> <li><u>Underestimating your ability to cope – if something bad does happen</u></li> </ul>	<p><b>3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk</b> (Ask Yourself...)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?</li> <li>• What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?</li> <li>• If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?</li> <li>• Is there another way of looking at this?</li> <li>• If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be?</li> </ul>

## WORKSHEET 2.5 Thought Record

### *Anxiety Thought Record: Ben*

<p><b>1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:</b></p> <p>1. I can't do this.</p> <p>2. I might fail.</p> <p>3. I just want to give up.</p>	<p><b>2. Identify Thought Distortions:</b> <i>(Select from list in box below)</i></p> <p>1. Catastrophizing, Focusing on only the negatives, Predicting the future, Underestimating your ability to cope.</p>	<p><b>3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk:</b> <i>(Use the questions below)</i></p> <p>1. This is a difficult time but I can get through it. I now choose to get help and support with this problem. I have options for how to handle this situation. I will decide on my options and take steps to help myself feel better so that I can cope.</p>
<p><b>1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:</b></p> <p>• Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</p> <p>• Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</p>	<p><b>2. Identify Thought Distortions:</b></p> <p><u>Catastrophizing</u> – <i>focusing on the worst possible outcome</i></p> <p><u>Overestimating probability</u> – <i>of bad things happening</i></p> <p><u>Perfectionism</u> – <i>pressuring the self to be perfect: "I should.."</i></p> <p><u>Focusing on only the negatives</u> – <i>ignoring positives</i></p> <p><u>Predicting the future</u> – <i>how can you know what will happen?</i></p> <p><u>Underestimating your ability to cope</u> – <i>if something bad does happen</i></p> <p><u>Mind Reading</u> – <i>imagining you know what another is thinking</i></p>	<p><b>3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk:</b> <i>(Ask Yourself...)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?</li> <li>• What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?</li> <li>• If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?</li> <li>• Is there another way of looking at this?</li> <li>• If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be?</li> </ul>

# Taking Stock: On the Other Side

The worst has passed, you got through and you're now feeling less overwhelmed. Take some time at the end of the term, academic year, or after a period of overwhelm has passed for personal reflection. Take stock and review what happened and how you managed. Use the spaces below, and the Worksheet in Appendix B (Worksheet 6.4 Overwhelm: Taking Stock).

**Examples.**

Ana realized when doing her Thought Record that she was harshly perfectionistic, and put an unfair amount of pressure on herself to do things perfectly. She committed to treat herself with greater care and gentleness going forward, and to make more time for downtime and Self Care.

Ben developed both academic and personal strategies while overwhelmed. Academically, he got better at assertiveness skills such as asking friends for help and meeting with his TA for help outside of class. Personally, he learned how to reach out to a friend for personal support when dealing with life stressors. Ben was proud of himself for learning and practicing these skills while under pressure.

Find some quiet time when you won't be interrupted. Ask yourself the following questions:  
How did I do with regards to overwhelm this year? Did I do better or worse than the term before?

How did I do with regards to overwhelm this year? Did I do better or worse than the term before?

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What academic strategies worked for me?

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What personal strategies worked for me?

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What do I want to commit to maintaining next term or academic year?

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What am I most proud of myself for handling, changing, or doing differently this term or year?

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What have I learned about myself by coming through a period of overwhelm?

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## **Conclusion:**

Good for you for taking care of yourself by doing this work. Know that you are not alone—many students experience overwhelm. As you go forward, continue to do what works for you to reduce your own personal overwhelm. Take care of yourself, be kind to yourself, and remember to prioritize your own personal needs. If you need any additional support, don't hesitate to reach out: help is just a phone call away.