

Feeling Overwhelmed: A Hidden Ally

People with depression frequently feel overwhelmed, an unpleasant emotional mixture of anxiety and futility. *“I really need to do this but I know I’m not capable of it.”* It drains energy, kills motivation, and makes any task more difficult. It may seem odd, then, to hear that feeling overwhelmed can be an important tool in overcoming depression, rather than an insurmountable barrier. But it is. Rather than trying to stamp out this feeling, we can welcome it at the door. It is the bearer of tremendously useful information, without which recovery would be far more difficult.

The message is simple, and it is always the same. *“You are attempting the impossible.”*

When you feel overwhelmed, trust it. If you *feel* overwhelmed, you *are* overwhelmed. If it seems to be too much, *it is*. Believe it. It may not seem like an impossible task (*“all I’m planning to do is clean the garage, not bring about world peace”*), but it will be impossible if you feel too overwhelmed to do it.

The temptation, the hidden trap in this feeling, is to give up altogether and go sit on the couch. *“If I can’t do it, I should stop trying.”* This is close to being a good idea, but it isn’t quite long enough. *“If I can’t do it, I should stop trying to do this, and do something smaller instead.”* This is the message of feeling overwhelmed. Give up on what you have been attempting, cut it back to something more manageable, and do that instead. Convert tall barriers into manageable staircases by chopping large goals into multiple smaller goals. Feeling overwhelmed is your signal to start chopping.

Sandy knew her “depressive diet” (as she called it) of coffee and taco chips wasn’t such a good idea, and she wanted to start eating properly. But for her, eating properly meant buying fresh ingredients at the local market, consulting her recipes, making a complicated and well-balanced meal, forcing it down despite her lack of appetite, and repeating the process for the next meal. She felt overwhelmed at the thought and would sit and have another handful of chips instead.

Trying to accept the message of feeling overwhelmed, she consciously “gave up” on her goal, chopping it back to something that didn’t make her feel so overwhelmed. For one meal she bought ready-made pasta and some sauce and made it for herself, not worrying whether it was a perfectly balanced meal. The success encouraged her to branch out to other easily-prepared foods.

One day she announced to her therapist that she’d had a breakthrough: She’d bought prepackaged and prewashed baby carrots to eat as snacks – something her puritan work ethic (“You should at least be able to wash your own carrots!”) had never allowed her to do before. As her mood improved her meals gradually returned to her usual standards, but she suspected she would never have achieved her goal if she had kept focusing on it from the start. The only way to reach it had been to “give up” in response to feeling overwhelmed.

Sometimes we are overwhelmed not by having too large a goal, but by thinking about too many smaller goals all at once. Perhaps you think of a demand that is being made on you or a project you want to complete. That reminds you of another problem or demand, then another, then another until you feel completely overwhelmed. *"I have to clean out the garage, but I also wanted to call about my insurance, and the house is a mess, and the kids are coming home for lunch, and I don't have any food, and I just started the laundry, and I have to get that report done for work...."*

Does this pattern sound familiar? Human beings are only able to think *clearly* about one thing at a time. The goal is to set aside the main stack of demands and focus on the one thing that you are working on. You may find it helpful to write a list of your problems and projects so that you don't have to keep them all in your head.

To sum up: *When feeling overwhelmed, focus on one thing at a time.*

What about once you are feeling well? It's still a good idea to learn from your emotions. Make it routine to use the feeling of being overwhelmed as a cue to cut back on your immediate goal and focus on one thing at a time. This doesn't necessarily mean accomplishing less, as Sandy found out. By refocusing on a single, small, immediate goal you can accomplish it without feeling so overwhelmed. Then you can move on to the next goal.

Can you think of a situation recently in which you felt overwhelmed? What was it?

What were you trying to do? What was your goal?

It may not seem that this goal was impossible, but it was difficult enough that you felt overwhelmed. If you were to narrow down the task, what could you set as the goal instead? For example, if you were planning a family dinner you might start by deciding on one part of the dinner, leaving the other parts for consideration later.

When you next feel overwhelmed, what would you like to remind yourself? Try to come up with a ritual that will help you make scaling back your goals a habit (perhaps saying "Thank you" to the feeling for the helpful information it brings).