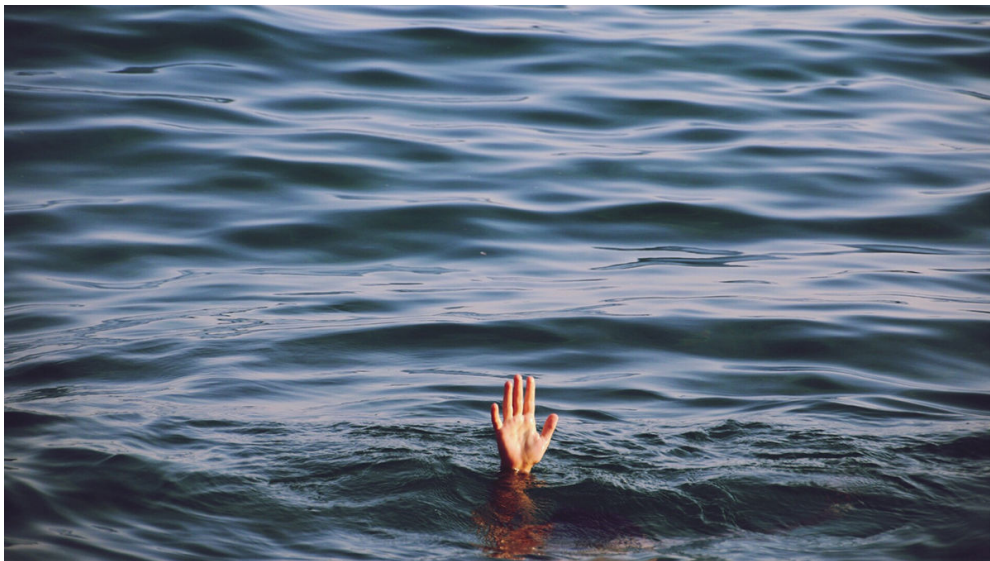




Time Management



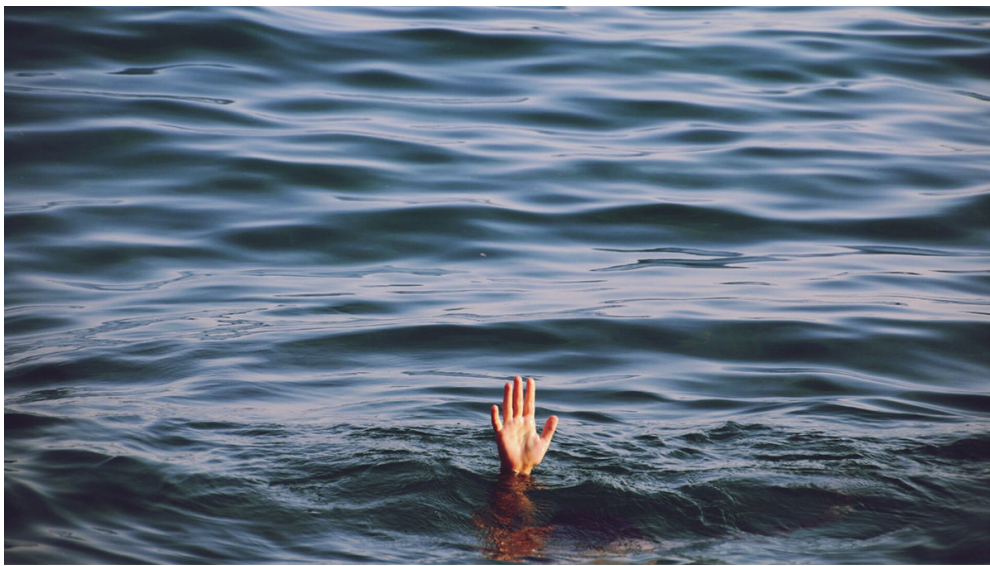
A Practical Plan for When You Feel Overwhelmed

Break your day into hour-long cycles. **by Peter Bregman**

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Adi Bilvod/EyeEm/Getty Images

In general, September is often a difficult month: I'm catching up from summer vacation as are many of my clients, projects tend to regain momentum, the Jewish holidays reduce my work days, and our kids need more of my time as they readjust themselves to new grades in school.

But this year feels worse. On top of my regular client work, I have three strategy offsites to design and facilitate, my publisher's edits of my next

book to review, and a [TEDx](#) talk to prepare and deliver — all in a month. And then, of course, there's my weekly blog.

Just to be clear: I'm not complaining. I feel incredibly fortunate to be so busy doing work I love. Still, it can be overwhelming.

And here's the crazy part: I just spent the last two days *trying* to work without actually working. I start on something but get distracted by the Internet. Or a phone call. Or an email. Or even a video online that has no value whatsoever. In fact, at a time when I need to be at my most efficient, I have become less efficient than ever.

You'd think it would be the opposite — that when we have a lot to do we become very productive in order to get it done — and sometimes that happens.

But when we have too much to do, we can freeze. Spinning without traction, we move fast but don't make progress on the things that are creating our stress. Because when there's so much competing for attention, we don't know where to begin and so we don't begin anywhere.

[Sheena Iyengar](#), a management professor at Columbia University Business School, did a wonderful study that I've mentioned before in this blog: she offered one group of people samples of six different jams available for purchase while she offered another group 24 different jams, including the six jams offered to the first group.

With all that choice you'd think the group offered the 24 jams would be more likely to purchase one. But it's the opposite. Those in the six-jam group were *ten times* more likely to actually purchase a jar of jam.

The more numerous our options, the more difficult it becomes to choose a single one, and so we end up choosing none at all. That's what happens when we have too many things to do. We become overwhelmed and don't do any of them.

Over the past few days, I've tried a lot of different things to escape this conundrum, and here's what worked for me:

First, spend a few minutes writing down everything you have to do on a piece of paper. Resist the urge to use technology for this task. Why? I'm not sure, but somehow writing on paper — and then crossing things out — creates momentum.

Second, spend 15 minutes — no more — knocking out as many of the easiest, fastest tasks as you can. Make your quick phone calls. Send your short emails. Don't worry about whether these are the most important tasks on your list. You're moving. The goal is to cross off as many items as possible in the shortest time. Use a timer to keep you focused.

Third, when 15 minutes are up, turn off your phone, close down all the windows on your computer, and choose the most daunting thing on your list, the one that instills the most stress or is the highest priority. Then work on it and only it — without hesitation or distraction — for 35 minutes.

After 35 minutes, take a break for 10 minutes and then start the hour-long process over again, beginning with the 15 minutes of quick actions.

“Thirty years ago,” Anne Lamott writes in her book [Bird By Bird](#), “my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he'd had three months to write. It was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, 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.'"

That's it. Bird by bird, starting with a bunch of easy birds to help you feel accomplished and then tackling a hard one to gain serious traction and reduce your stress level. All timed.

Working within a specific and limited time frame is important because the race against time keeps us focused. When our stress is generalized, it's diffuse, which makes it hard to manage. Using a short time frame actually increases the pressure but it keeps our effort specific, and particular to a single task. That increases good, motivating stress while reducing negative, disconcerting stress. So the fog of overwhelm dissipates and forward movement progresses.

In practice, I'm finding that while I make myself work at least the full 35 minutes, I don't always stop when the 35 minutes of hard work is over because I'm in the middle of something — like writing this post — and I have traction. But, though it's tempting, I don't go over the 15 minutes of easy, fast work. When the timer stops, so do I, immediately transitioning to the hard work.

Maybe this has been working simply because it's novel for me and, like a new diet, offers some structure to motivate my effort. For me though, today, it doesn't matter because it's a useful tool. And I'll keep using it until I don't need it or it stops working.

Am I still stressed? Sure. But overwhelmed? Much less so. Because I'm crossing things off my list, feeling myself getting somewhere on my little tasks and my big ones, bird by bird.

This content was adapted for inclusion in the *HBR Guide to Managing Stress*.

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