

Overwhelm

What This Emotion May Be Telling You

Overwhelm is the experience of feeling that the demands around you - or inside you - are greater than the capacity you have available right now. It can affect thinking, memory, decision-making, emotions, the body and behaviour. NHS and Mind guidance both recognise feeling overwhelmed, difficulty concentrating and struggling to make decisions as common experiences when stress becomes too much.

Overwhelm may be telling you: there is too much on my plate, I need fewer demands, my nervous system needs recovery, I need help, or something important has been ignored for too long.

What overwhelm can feel like

- racing thoughts or being unable to think at all
- difficulty deciding what to do first
- irritability, tearfulness or feeling close to snapping
- freezing, avoiding or shutting down
- forgetfulness and reduced concentration
- muscle tension, headaches, stomach symptoms or a racing heart
- feeling exhausted but unable to settle
- wanting everyone and everything to stop demanding something

Overwhelm is not always about the size of one problem

Often it is the accumulation of many small demands: work, messages, appointments, caring, money worries, health, household tasks, sensory input, relationship strain and decisions. One additional request can become the point where capacity is exceeded.

Capacity check

What is taking up space in my mind today? _____
What feels urgent? _____
What can wait? _____
What can somebody else help with? _____

Overwhelm and depression

Depression can reduce energy, motivation and concentration. This means a workload that was previously manageable may suddenly feel impossible. Overwhelm can then deepen depression when unfinished tasks create guilt, shame and hopelessness.

Reducing demand is not failure. When capacity changes, expectations may need to change too.

Fight, flight, freeze and shutdown

When the nervous system perceives too much demand or threat, people may become restless and driven, irritable and confrontational, avoidant, frozen or shut down. None of these responses tells us that someone is lazy or uncaring; they may indicate that regulation and capacity have been exceeded.

The first task is often not solving everything. It is creating enough safety and space for thinking to return.

What might overwhelm be telling you?

- **I need to prioritise.** Everything cannot be first.
- **I need rest.** Recovery is a biological need, not a reward.
- **I need support.** Some demands should be shared.
- **I need a boundary.** Too many requests may be entering without enough protection.
- **I need clarity.** Vague or competing demands increase cognitive load.
- **I need less sensory input.** Noise, light, movement and conversation may be contributing.
- **I need to grieve or process.** Emotional load can consume capacity even when it is invisible.

Overwhelm and neurodivergence

Autistic and ADHD people may experience overwhelm through executive-functioning demands, sensory load, transitions, masking, working memory pressure, interruptions or too many open tasks. A person can know exactly what needs doing

and still be unable to initiate or sequence it.

Helpful support may include body doubling, visual lists, one instruction at a time, timers, sensory reduction, predictable routines, written communication and breaking tasks into very small visible steps.

Make it smaller

The task that feels impossible: _____

The smallest visible first step: _____

What information or item do I need first? _____

Who could help me start? _____

Decision overload

When many choices compete for attention, even small decisions can become exhausting. Reduce unnecessary choices: repeat meals, create routines, use templates, choose from two options rather than ten, or decide tomorrow's first task before finishing today.

Boundaries and overwhelm

Overwhelm sometimes tells us that too much is being asked. Notice automatic yeses, constant availability, unpaid emotional labour, interruptions and responsibilities you have absorbed because nobody else stepped forward.

A boundary can sound like: 'I cannot do that today', 'I can help for 20 minutes', 'I need this in writing', or 'Which of these tasks is the priority?'

A personal reflection

"I used to wait until I was completely overwhelmed before admitting I needed help. By then every task felt equally urgent and I could not think clearly. I am learning to notice the earlier signs - rereading the same thing, becoming snappy, forgetting simple steps. Now I try to reduce the load before I reach the point where I shut down." - illustrative personal reflection

Sensory overwhelm

Overwhelm can be physical as well as emotional. Bright lights, layered noise, touch, heat, smells, crowds and constant screen input can consume capacity. If sensory load is contributing, problem-solving alone may not work until the environment changes.

- move somewhere quieter or dimmer
- use headphones, ear defenders or familiar sound
- reduce conversation temporarily
- change uncomfortable clothing or temperature
- allow repetitive movement or another safe regulating action
- communicate that you need processing time

Emotional overwhelm

Grief, conflict, uncertainty, trauma reminders, caregiving and worry can create a large invisible workload. You may appear to be doing very little while internally processing a great deal.

Try asking: 'What am I carrying emotionally that is using capacity today?'

The overwhelm spiral

Too many demands - difficulty thinking - tasks pile up - self-criticism - avoidance - more demands - greater overwhelm. Breaking the spiral can happen at any point: reduce demand, choose one task, ask for help, regulate the body or challenge the self-criticism.

Sort, do, defer, delegate, drop

DO now: _____

DEFER until later: _____

DELEGATE or ask for help: _____

DROP because it is not essential: _____

A 10-minute overwhelm reset

- Stop adding new tasks.
- Drink water and attend to any immediate physical need.
- Reduce noise, screens or conversation if possible.

- Write everything down so your brain does not have to hold it.
- Circle one genuinely urgent item.
- Break it into the smallest next action.
- Set a short timer and do only that step.
- Reassess capacity before choosing another task.

When rest feels impossible

People often respond to overwhelm by working faster. Sometimes that helps briefly, but sustained pressure without recovery can worsen concentration and emotional regulation. A pause may feel unproductive while actually protecting your ability to continue.

Rest can be five quiet minutes, lying down, reducing sensory input, stopping decisions, eating, sleeping, taking a walk or allowing someone else to carry responsibility for a while.

Overwhelm at work

Workload, unclear priorities, constant communication, meetings, interruptions and inaccessible systems can all contribute. If everything is labelled urgent, ask a manager to prioritise. Reasonable adjustments may be relevant where disability or health conditions affect how demands are managed.

Overwhelm in relationships and caring roles

Caring for others can create practical and emotional overload. Resentment, irritability or withdrawal may be signals that capacity has been exceeded, not that you have stopped caring.

Consider respite, shared responsibilities, protected time, practical help and honest conversations about what you can realistically sustain.

Supporting someone who is overwhelmed

- Reduce questions and choices.
- Ask what can be removed rather than what else they should do.
- Offer specific practical help.
- Use calm, clear language and one step at a time.
- Do not interpret shutdown or slow replies as lack of care.
- Protect dignity - support without taking control unnecessarily.

When extra support may help

Seek professional support when overwhelm is persistent, repeatedly affects functioning, is accompanied by significant depression or anxiety, or you are no longer managing basic needs. NHS talking therapies may be available for adults experiencing anxiety or depression-related difficulties.

If you cannot keep yourself safe, are thinking about suicide or self-harm, or there is immediate danger, call 999 or go to A&E.; In England, NHS 111 can direct you to urgent mental-health support. Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123.

A seven-day overwhelm awareness exercise

- Day 1 - List everything currently using capacity.
- Day 2 - Identify your earliest signs of overload.
- Day 3 - Remove or postpone one non-essential demand.
- Day 4 - Ask somebody for one specific form of help.
- Day 5 - Reduce one sensory or digital demand.
- Day 6 - Practise one clear boundary.
- Day 7 - Review what genuinely needs to change longer term.

Books and further exploration

- *Burnout* - Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski.
- *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?* - Dr Julie Smith.
- *The Happiness Trap* - Russ Harris.
- *Self-Compassion* - Kristin Neff.

Clinical and source notes

This resource is informed by current NHS guidance on stress and low mood and Mind guidance on stress, overwhelm, identifying triggers, reducing demands, taking breaks, setting achievable targets and building support. Stress can affect emotions, concentration, decision-making, sleep, physical symptoms and behaviour, and prolonged or intense stress can worsen mental-health difficulties.

This guide is educational and is not a diagnosis. Overwhelm can occur for many reasons, including stress, depression, anxiety, trauma, neurodivergence, caring responsibilities, physical illness and environmental demands. Persistent or severe symptoms deserve individual assessment.

What this emotion may be telling you

Overwhelm often says less about your strength and more about the relationship between **demand and available capacity**. The question is not always 'How can I cope with more?' Sometimes it is 'What can be reduced, shared, clarified, postponed or supported?'

You do not have to do everything today. Progress over pressure. One manageable step is still movement.

Space to Breathe Therapy - Understanding emotions without judging them.