

Managing Feeling Overwhelmed

By Rita Hitching, M.Sc., BSc. Psychology

By now, you are probably back at school, caught up with friends, memorized your schedule, and perhaps starting to feel overwhelmed with school. You may not be aware of how overwhelmed you are feeling, and may instead be experience stomach aches, irritability, loss of appetite or changes in sleep patterns. These physical symptoms are sometimes a way for your body to let you know that it's feeling a little anxious or worried. I'm going to explain what emotions you may be feeling if your are trying to cope with a lot of demands, and give you a tool kit to deal with all the competing demands.

Your teenage brain is glorious - if you didn't know that already. Neuroscience has shown that the brain goes through critical periods of growth and development - while in the womb, the first year of life, and the early years; right into adulthood. What scientists have more recently discovered is that the brain undergoes a 'secret mission' of change during the period between the ages of 12 to 19 years that is truly unique.

EMOTIONS

Emotional are a normal part of being human, we feel all kinds of feelings - happy, surprised, angry, anxious, sad, shocked, etc. Research has shown some useful and some unhelpful ways to manage your emotions, let me explain:

HELPFUL

1. Friends

Friends understand you, and know what you are going through. Talk to them and let them know how you are feeling stressed about school or other stuff.

2. Social Connection

Join groups that are involved in activities that you enjoy. If you are feeling overwhelmed, taking a break is a great way to manage your feelings. Research has shown that social connections, lower our level of anxiety and provide much needed support. If the group you meet up with makes you laugh, all the better. Humor is a great counterweight to stress.

3. Self-Care

Taking care of your body will benefit your mind and will make you feel less overwhelmed. Make sure you are getting enough sleep. Research on poor sleep due to staying up late completing assignments has a really negative impact on mood.

Try to organize your calendar so that you can get your assignments done early, enough to fit in some relaxation time before sleep (e.g. reading a book, that you enjoy). Having a nighttime routine enables your body to become relaxed and ready to fall asleep.

The other essential component to getting good sleep and improved mood is physical exercise. Research into the brain benefits of exercise on cognitive ability and improved prefrontal cortex functioning is very strong. Exercise fills the brain with lots of dopamine lifting your mood and increases the connection between brain areas. Good nutrition is essential for your brain to function at its best , think nuts, seeds, healthy fats and good protein.

The are unhelpful ways to manage any emotions you may be experiencing related to feeling overwhelmed, these include:

UNHELPFUL

1. Denial

At times it's hard to admit that you are not feeling like you are coping with all the demands that are placed on you. Not acknowledging your feelings, and trying to bottle them up, only leads to pressure cooker of emotions that at some point will explode. Letting off a little steam by telling others how you feel can be very helpful.

2. Withdrawal

Shutting yourself off from others can seem like the best way to cope with intense feelings but research has shown that isolation only intensifies negative emotions. Avoiding being with others makes you feel lonely, misunderstood, and angry. By not discussing how you feel with others, you get into a negative thought cycle that is hard to break. The feelings and thoughts of "I can't do this" or "There's no point" or "It's too late



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now" can be difficult to stop. Your brain needs interaction with others to function at its best.

Now that you understand the best ways to manage your emotions, you need a tool kit to help deal with your many demands.

YOUR TOOL KIT

How to reduce the likelihood of feelings of stress, some of the tips may seem obvious, but research has shown that preventing anxiety is more effective than trying to lower it once it's happened.

1. Learning Style

What way do you prefer to learn? Visually, by practicing, or by listening? However, you prefer to study for a topic or an exam, do that. Everyone learns in a different way, follow what you and what your brain prefer. There is no right or wrong way to study.

2. Study Skills

Did you know that you can learn how to learn? Ideas like mnemonics, and visualization can be helpful. Learn how to take effective notes - research has shown that taking handwritten notes is the best way to recall information. Students that join a study group have been shown to get better grades than students that study alone. With all the virtual tools available, you can easily arrange a "Virtual Study Group".

3. Organization

Make use of stationary to help you organize all your classes., binders, notebooks, schedule etc. Select a location where you plan to do most of your assignments. Memory research has shown that the brain prefers to work in a predictable location. The brain learns to associate a location with an action (e.g. bedroom = sleep, kitchen = eat).

4. Work Area

Keep the areas where you are working clean and organized. Keep your desk and work area with minimal distractions, allow the brain to be able to focus on the task and not be distracted by other items. If you prefer to listen to music as you study, consider having music in the background that is not too loud and conducive of learning - search YouTube for music to study. Have a snack before you start so that you are not distracted by being hungry once you start your work.

5. Time

Use a calendar so that you have a visual plan of what's coming your way. Remember the brain recall events better using visual cues - like a wall calendar. Include social events, sports, other commitments. Divide your calendar into chunks of time - ideally in 30 minute increments. If a task is taking too long, have a break and revisit it another day.

6. Teacher

If you are starting to feel overwhelmed reach out to your teacher. They are likely to be more sympathetic a few days before an assignment is due than on the day or day before you are due to hand it in. Feeling overwhelmed often occurs when you feel like you've ran out of time to complete a task. If an assignment is expected to take 2 weeks to complete, allocate 20-30 minutes daily to it. The brain is fully focused into a given task after 15-20 minutes, so allocate a minimum of 30 minutes to any assignment to enable your brain to reach full focus.

REMEMBER

Everyone feels overwhelmed at times, it's part of living in a world with multiple demands. You have the skills to manage, reflect on what worked for you in the past when you felt overwhelmed. Try to avoid the things that made you feel more anxious or overwhelmed in the past.

Remember, acknowledging your feelings is essential to be able to devise a strategy to manage them. All feelings are normal, and will pass, getting the grade you want at school, making the cut for a team, or being part of a certain group may seem all consuming but you are more important than any of those things.

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Managing Emotions CHECKLIST

Start Here

- Pause:** take a moment to reflect on what you are feeling and why.
- Awareness:** knowing where you are is essential to mapping out a plan to manage the situation.
- Plan:** Consider what has worked in the past, and what has not been helpful. Start there.

Mood Booster

Activities that improve mood, enable better management of negative emotions

- Watch a comedy or cute / funny YouTube video
- Go for a walk or do some exercise you enjoy
- Play with a pet
- Make a list of fun things to do

Feelings

- Make a gratitude list
- Express feelings - draw, dance, sing
- Vent, cry, scream, shout, punch a pillow, write in a diary

Self-Care

- Eat healthy and nutritious food
- Get some relaxation and sleep
- Do something that makes you feel good

Problem Solve

- List your strengths
- Note possible solutions
- Relaxation and meditation
- Ask for help