

# TOGETHER WITHIN

## TherapyTalk



What your therapist means when they talk about.....

### “Overwhelm”

#### What is it?

In our current world, the term ‘overwhelmed’ is a common expression. The growing field of neurolinguistics is teaching us that language doesn’t just communicate emotion, it shapes how and what we’re feeling, so using the right words to describe how we feel is important. Feeling overwhelmed doesn’t mean something is wrong with you—it’s a normal response when too many things are happening at once, or when something feels too big to handle. When you’re overwhelmed, your brain can have trouble sorting through everything. You might feel frozen, panicked, shut down, or even really tired all of a sudden. These are ways your nervous system tries to protect you when it feels like it’s too much. Sometimes, people blame themselves or think they should “handle it better,” but overwhelm isn’t a sign of weakness. It’s a sign that your brain and body are saying, “I need a break, and I need it to be now. Not later.”

In therapy, we look at what causes that overwhelmed feeling and how to recognize the early signs. That way, you can learn tools to calm your system and take care of yourself before things get too intense. You might learn breathing exercises, grounding skills, or ways to break big problems into smaller steps. The goal isn’t to never feel overwhelmed—it’s to understand what’s happening and find ways to feel safer and more in control when it does.

#### Signs You Might Be Overwhelmed:

- Racing thoughts or looping worries
- Trouble sleeping or resting
- Difficulty making decisions
- Emotional outbursts or irritability
- Avoiding things that feel “too much”
- Feeling spaced out, foggy, or numb
- Difficulty finding words, or explaining how you feel and what you need
- Sudden tearfulness



#### Here comes the science.....

When you feel overwhelmed, your brain and body are reacting to more stress or information than they can handle at once. The **amygdala**, which is the part of your brain that deals with emotions and danger, sends out an alarm that triggers your body’s “**fight-or-flight**” response, even if the threat isn’t physical. Your body then releases stress hormones like **cortisol** and **adrenaline**, making your heart beat faster and your mind race. If this keeps happening, your brain gets tired and your mood can drop.

*“It’s like I’m carrying too many bags and someone just handed me another one—I can’t hold it all anymore. It feels like I am drinking from a fire hose, and now it is drowning me. Everyone keeps telling me to ‘just breathe,’ but it feels like I’m underwater.”*

**Kristi, mother of three, full time worker**



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## Common causes of overwhelm

**Too Many Tasks and Responsibilities:** Having an overloaded to-do list, juggling multiple roles (work, family, school), or feeling pressure to do everything at once.

**Challenging or Demanding Roles:** Roles that require constant problem-solving, high performance, or emotional labor can quickly lead to overwhelm.

**Life Changes and Transitions:** Major changes such as moving, starting a new job or school, getting married or divorced, or having a child can disrupt routines and create stress.



**New or Unfamiliar Responsibilities:** Taking on new tasks or stepping into unfamiliar roles increases the risk of feeling overwhelmed due to uncertainty and learning curves.

**Cognitive Overload:** Too much information, multitasking, or constant digital notifications can exhaust your mental bandwidth and lead to paralysis or indecision.

**Perfectionism and Overthinking:** High self-expectations, fear of making mistakes, and rumination can make tasks feel bigger and more stressful than they are.

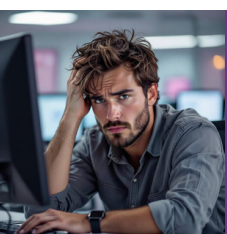
**Social Factors and Discrimination:** Experiencing stigma, racism, homophobia, or lack of access to services increases vulnerability to overwhelm.

**Chronic Stress:** Ongoing stress without relief can accumulate and eventually lead to emotional shutdown or burnout.

**Work-Related Stress:** Unhappy work environments, unclear expectations, heavy workloads, long hours, poor management, or job insecurity are major causes.

**Financial Worries:** Debt, not being able to afford necessities, or sudden increases in expenses or financial uncertainty can be overwhelming.

**Unfinished Tasks and Mental Clutter:** Having many incomplete tasks or unresolved issues creates ongoing stress and a sense of unease.



*“Overwhelm often shows up when multiple needs compete for attention at the same time. When the system is flooded, our capacity to think, choose, or connect gets smaller. That’s not you failing—it’s your body protecting you.”*

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## Coping with overwhelm

If you're overwhelmed — meaning you can't even begin to get the next thing done — **you need to do nothing**. Brené Brown, PhD, who is a therapist and renowned clinical researcher says;

*"Overwhelm is the all-too-common feeling that our lives are somehow unfolding faster than the human nervous system and psyche are able to manage well. Our bodies and minds are experiencing that quicksand feeling."*

Doing nothing is important because there's a growing body of research that indicates that we don't process other emotional information accurately when we feel overwhelmed, and this can result in poor decision making. So the first step in recovering from feeling overwhelmed is to take 10-15 minutes to **do absolutely nothing**. No phone scrolling, no email checking, no talking. Nothing. If you are not in an environment conducive to doing nothing, take a bathroom break.



### Why doing nothing is important

Researcher Carol Gohm used the term “overwhelmed” to describe an experience where our emotions are **intense**, our focus on them is **moderate**, and our clarity about exactly what we're feeling is **low** enough that we get confused when trying to identify or describe the emotions. In other words: On a scale of 1 to 10, I'm **feeling** my emotions at about 10, I'm **paying attention** to them at about 5, and I **understand them** at about 2.

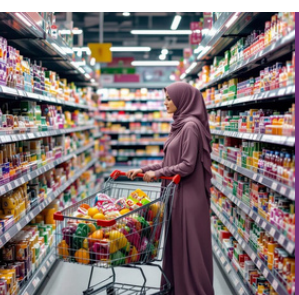
### The next steps

After pausing, and once you can think a little clearer, here are some gentle steps to help you feel better in control.

**Prioritize and Let Go:** Make a list of your tasks and identify what's most important. Let go of less urgent or non-essential commitments to reduce your load.

**Break Tasks into Smaller Steps:** Divide big tasks into smaller, manageable pieces. Focus on completing one small step at a time to make things feel less daunting.

**Delegate or Ask for Help:** If possible, share responsibilities with others. Delegating tasks can ease your burden and help you focus on what's most important.



“Overwhelm means an extreme level of stress and emotional and or cognitive intensity to the point of feeling unable to function. The big difference is we can function in stress, we really can't function in overwhelm.”

“The research shows, the nothingness is the only way to really reset after overwhelm, doing “nothing” should mean you’re not doing any extra action to add to your overwhelm. It should mean you’re taking a complete step back from your life in order to reset.”

Brené Brown, PhD



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## More ideas to help reduce overwhelm



**Get Organized:** Write down your to-dos and use tools like calendars or apps to keep track. Organizing your thoughts and tasks can make them feel more manageable.

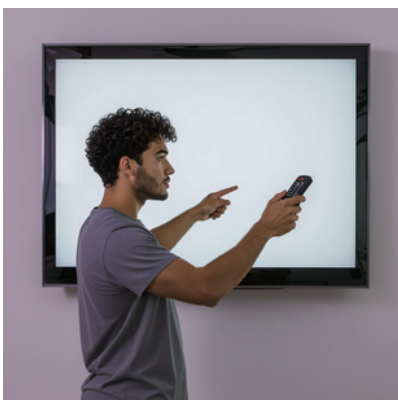
**Focus on What You Can Control:** Direct your energy toward things you have the power to change, and try to let go of worries about what’s outside your control.

**Set Boundaries and Learn to Say No:** Protect your time and energy by setting limits with others and saying no to extra commitments when needed. Ask your therapist for help with how to set healthy boundaries.

**Practice Mindfulness or Meditation:** Mindfulness exercises and meditation can help you stay present and reduce anxiety. Techniques like the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding exercise can bring your focus back to the moment.

**Be Gentle with Yourself:** Remind yourself that it’s okay to feel overwhelmed. Treat yourself with kindness and try to avoid harsh self-criticism.

**Schedule Worry Time:** Set aside a specific time to think about your worries, and outside of that time, try to keep your focus on the present.



**Limit Information Intake:** Take breaks from news, social media, and other sources of constant information. Too much input can increase stress and make it harder to focus on what matters most.

**Create a Calming Routine:** Establish daily habits that help you relax, such as listening to music, reading, taking a warm bath, or practicing gentle yoga. A calming routine signals to your brain that it’s safe to unwind and recharge.

**Use Positive Self-Talk:** Replace negative or panicked thoughts with encouraging statements like, “I can handle this one step at a time,” or “It’s okay to ask for help.” Positive self-talk builds resilience and confidence.



“As you recover from overwhelm, remember that healing doesn’t mean doing everything at once—it means allowing yourself to pause, breathe, and take one small step at a time. Trust that even gentle progress is real progress.”