

Help for Overwhelm

With LaShelle Lowe-Charde

If overwhelm is an all too frequent visitor, you likely find yourself withdrawing and trying to arrange conditions to be as quiet and peaceful as possible. When conditions are just right, you might get a short respite, but overwhelm seems to return no matter what you do.

As you examine the inner workings of overwhelm, you will likely find two major internal triggers - disconnect from choice & unintegrated trauma. When you are disconnected from your sense of choice, life seems like a pressure cooker. The responsibilities and commitments you've chosen seem to come at you faster than you can meet them. Interrupting this onslaught requires a re-connection with choice. Here are a few ways that may help you reconnect with your choice:

- Find resource in the energy of the needs. Name and connect with the needs you had hoped to meet when you initially chose a given responsibility or commitment.
- Get grounded in what's actually happening. Overwhelm will have you thinking that your every action is life or death. Unless you are actually in a crisis situation, you can mindfully notice that you and the people around you are basically okay, there is no crisis, and it doesn't all depend on you.
- Find cheerleaders for your choice. "You can authentically choose what's right for you." This is a mantra a student asked the whole group to say to her in a class recently. You may simply need compassionate cheerleaders to remind you that you get to choose, that's it's a good thing for everyone if you choose exactly what's right for you. The ability to authentically choose is often connected to a sense of worthiness or goodness, i.e., you are worthy of a choice that supports your thriving.

The second major internal trigger for overwhelm is typically unintegrated or unhealed trauma. Trauma leaves in its wake a hypersensitive nervous system. In psychology we call this hyper-arousal. This means that your nervous system is responding with a red alert to things or people in your environment that don't need your attention and aren't a threat. Symptoms of a hypersensitive nervous system include a high startle response, sweaty palms, racing heart rate, shutting down, fuzzy mind, numbness, shallow breathing, freezing, and withdrawing. Fortunately the healing world has come a long way in its understanding and treatment of trauma. Body based methods for the treatment of trauma have been shown to be incredibly effective and can allow healing and integration without having to recall the initial traumatizing events. Somatic experiencing as founded by Peter Levine and EMDR as founded by Francine Shapiro are two well developed modalities for the treatment of trauma.

Meditation practices such as body scans and following your breath are essential for bringing your body into a normal resting state and interrupting the trauma response.

Understanding triggers for overwhelm is helpful only insofar as you bring compassion with understanding. Compassion for your experience is the basis of all healing work. Every moment of overwhelm is an opportunity to engage in compassionate witnessing of your experience. For example, "I am feeling overwhelmed. It's a difficult place to be. I long for peace. It's okay for overwhelm to be here, I can be with it in compassion."

Practice

Take a moment to follow your breath for three minutes. Then notice that you are safe and let your body relax even more. Come back to this practice throughout the day.