

Dismantle Your Stress
from the Inside Out

Overcoming Overwhelm

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1

THE IMPACT OF OVERWHELM

OVERWHELM AFFECTS US on all levels: body, mind, and spirit. It is both the cause of and result of stress. It's a feeling, and it's a physiological state in which our bodies have been called upon to do more than they are designed to handle.

When the stress of overwhelm manifests physically, it plays a role in many of the diseases that plague our culture: cancer, heart disease, inflammation, migraines, irritable bowel disease, obesity, and more. Over the past two decades in my integrative medical practice, I've found that most, if not all, symptoms of compromised health are related, in one way or another, to stress and overwhelm.

When overwhelm manifests mentally or emotionally, it most commonly shows up as worry or anxiety. We may lie awake at night thinking about what we forgot to do, what we didn't do well, whom we let down. We may be grumpy and irritable, often taking out our frustration on those we love most. We may convince ourselves we're not doing anything well enough, and that everyone else seems to manage their lives better than we do. It becomes harder to focus on our successes for more than two moments.

When overwhelm affects our spirit, we feel hopeless, which leads to a crisis of faith or depression. It can cause us to check out, shut down, and become less effective and less productive in vital areas of our lives. We stop eating healthfully, exercising, and taking care of ourselves. Sometimes the feeling of overwhelm is so uncomfortable that we numb it with food, alcohol, social media,

or shopping. Then we beat ourselves up over having made these choices, deepening our feeling of hopelessness.

Overwhelm is a holistic problem that creates more problems. We can't just wait for it to stop. We need to dismantle it, intentionally, one step at a time. But to do this effectively, we first need to understand that stress isn't necessarily a bad thing; it is a biological, evolutionarily adaptive response to danger, essential to human survival.

The Physiology of Stress

Imagine it's Africa, five hundred years ago, and you're at the watering hole with your baby. She is strapped to your back, and you can feel her heavy warmth through the fabric. Across the way, water buffalo are wading in the shallow water. A zeal of zebras wanders by.

You're here to collect water and bring it back to your village. Everything is calm, yet something doesn't feel right.

You scan the area. Suddenly the hair stands up on the back of your neck. Your stomach tightens. Your mouth gets dry. Then you see her: a lioness in the distance, crouching in the reeds.

Your body knows exactly what to do.

An area in your brain called the hypothalamus sends a signal to your adrenal glands (which sit on top of your kidneys in the small of your back) to make a hormone called epinephrine and release it into your bloodstream. You may know epinephrine by its other name, adrenaline. It's adrenaline's job to prepare your body either to do battle or get away—to fight or take flight. The air passages in your lungs dilate to allow your body to get more oxygen, your pupils dilate for more acute vision, your heart rate increases, and some of your blood vessels constrict while others dilate to shunt blood flow to the areas most needed in order to run.

Soon after the epinephrine, your adrenal glands release another hormone, called cortisol, into your bloodstream. This hormone suppresses the functions of your body that are superfluous when you need to fight or flee from danger—predominantly digestion and immune function. All your energy needs to be harnessed toward one purpose: getting you and your baby out of this situation alive.

The combination of adrenaline and cortisol will also stimulate your body to release sugar into your bloodstream to fuel your muscles and brain. After all, you've got to be able to get away from that lioness swiftly and safely.

And off you go.

Once you and your baby are safe, your body will typically stay on high alert for up to an hour as it breaks down the extra epinephrine and cortisol and clears the sugar from your blood. Getting things back to baseline is no easy task for your body. The process of making these hormones and then breaking them down uses up your stores of what are called cofactors. These are the vitamins, minerals, and other proteins and enzymes that play a role in the biological pathways that drive all of your body's functions. It takes time to replenish these stores, and you should be in a restful and relaxed state to recover.

Our ancient response system, designed for short periods of acute stress followed by ample time for our bodies to recover, doesn't always translate well to modern life. Sure, there are situations we face that are akin to the lioness stalking our baby. A car runs a red light when you're crossing the street. You hear someone trying to break into your house. The flight attendant announces they need to drop the oxygen masks. At such times, a normal stress response is a good thing. And even in less intense situations, your stress response can still be beneficial, enhancing your ability to focus and your capacity to work harder and achieve more.

The problem is that most of the stresses we face *aren't* life threatening. Our body's stress-response system can't always tell the difference between a lioness stalking us at the watering hole and, say, a deadline at work that our subconscious tells us is critical to meet if we want to keep our job. And for those of us with a history of major stress or trauma, our bodies are even more likely to react in ways disproportionate to the current level of threat.

A stress response is your body's way of saying *pay attention*. This is a good thing! But when there's too much stress arising from too many different sources, or stress is prolonged over time, so that our bodies no longer have time to break down and clear out stress hormones, relax, and replenish, we lose our ability to discern what to

pay attention to and how to respond. Do we run or step on the brake? Do we fight or fasten our seat belt? This is when our stresses conjoin to become overwhelm.

Stress and Your Health

A stress can *directly* impact you when your body is burdened or overwhelmed beyond what it can reasonably manage or respond to, thus leading to dysfunction. For example, not enough sleep can decrease the functionality of your immune system. Using the same finger motion on your track pad day in and day out can lead to overuse tendinitis. Eating dairy when you're sensitive can lead to persistent eczema.

Stress can also directly impact you via a chronic, ongoing production of stress hormones. This can happen if you are consistently overwhelmed, on edge, or even reacting disproportionately to the day-to-day stresses in your life. Irregular sleep patterns, tight deadlines, excessive caffeine consumption, procrastination, and other stresses like traffic jams, skipping meals, or high pressure jobs are all examples of day-to-day stresses that can lead to a chronic stress response. The chronic production of adrenaline can lead to problems including premature aging, attention issues, fatigue, anxiety, and depression. The chronic production of cortisol can cause immune dysregulation, weight gain—particularly around your belly—digestive symptoms, depression, headaches, and reproductive issues.¹ And over time there is a risk that your body will lose the ability to respond properly to stress overall.² Naturopathic and other holistically minded physicians may refer to this loss of ability to respond appropriately to stress as *adrenal fatigue*. (Please note that adrenal fatigue is *not* a formal medical diagnosis. For more information please see “Resources.”)

Recent studies also show that stress is associated with “the body losing its ability to regulate the inflammatory response.”³ That means any condition ending in “-itis,” such as sinusitis (sinus inflammation), arthritis (joint inflammation), enteritis (small intestine inflammation,) and others, if not caused by chronic stress, will be exacerbated by it. Even conditions such as depression, dementia, and age-related bone loss, which historically we never would have

associated with inflammation, have been shown to have an inflammatory component and would therefore also be impacted by (or caused by) stress.

Stress can *indirectly* impact you when your system is generally overloaded or overwhelmed. In short, if your body is overwhelmed with more stress than it can handle, it will manifest whatever symptoms you are predisposed to. I call this predisposition a “weak spot.” One person’s weak spot may be headaches; another’s weak spot may be gastrointestinal symptoms. It is the accumulation of stress, rather than one specific thing, that leads to these symptoms.

Remember, though, stress is not your enemy! It’s too much stress, or the wrong kinds of stress, that can have a direct and negative impact on your health, state of mind, and well-being.

My patient James had been experiencing acute lower abdominal pain and had been diagnosed with diverticulitis. It was an unusual condition for a thirty-eight-year-old surfer and avid weightlifter with a very healthy diet.

When I asked him about his stress load, he told me that it was high. In addition to running his restaurant, where he was responsible for over a dozen employees and accountable to two business partners, he had recently added a catering arm to his business. Then there was his personal life: A friend had committed suicide the year before, and James was the person who found him. He had a falling out with several close family members. He had ended a long-term relationship. The two weeks just before his appointment had been especially eventful: His new catering truck had needed major repairs. He had been training new employees. He had begun dating a lovely new woman.

Though James couldn’t see it, all of the things he had going on in his life—positive and negative, personally and professionally—were just too much.

James likely had a disposition to the diverticula, but it was clear to me that the accumulation of too much stress had overwhelmed his system, decreasing his immune function and increasing his inflammation, allowing him—a healthy, fit thirty-eight-year-old man with a good diet—to develop diverticulitis. To decrease his chances of another attack, he needed to assess the totality of stress in his life and

figure out what he was willing and able to do to reduce his overall load. Less stress = less overwhelm. Less overwhelm = less stress.

Stress and Your Mental Health

James's overwhelm impacted his physical health, but for many it both affects and is affected by mental health. Over 40 million adults in the United States have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, and it is estimated that in any given year over 15.7 million adults experience at least one episode of depression.⁴

Making good choices in the best of circumstances can be hard. Making good choices when you're stressed, anxious, depressed, over-worried, or profoundly overwhelmed is almost impossible. The drain that occurs when you're not feeling mentally stable and balanced can outweigh any of the things that you might do for yourself to feel better. Sadly, addressing our mental health is often a last priority unless we find ourselves in crisis.

If you are suffering from anxiety or depression, your progress through this book might be a little slower. That doesn't mean that you won't benefit from it; you will! But if you need support, get it sooner rather than later. You deserve to feel well.

Don't get caught up in the diagnosis if that bothers you; focus on what you need to do to feel better. In some cases it may mean therapy. In some cases, it may mean seeing a licensed naturopathic physician (ND) who can work with nutrition, prescribe appropriate medication (where this is within scope of practice), and/or recommend supplements. In other cases it may mean working with a primary care physician, or in more complicated cases a psychiatrist or a mental health nurse practitioner. Get the care you need that lines up with your own health paradigm and beliefs. (We'll be talking more about how to do this in step 3.)

Once you begin to feel better, you'll have much more energy and focus to deal with more tangible stressors and get out from under your overwhelm.



2

THE BUCKET THEORY

I WAS TAUGHT in school that your capacity to hold all the things in your life that cause your body or your mind any kind of stress can be thought of as a bucket. It holds all of your responsibilities, the myriad stresses and burdens you face. It holds the commitments you take on—the big ones and the small ones, the temporary and the long term, those you’ve chosen and those life has handed to you. Eventually, if you continue to load stresses into your bucket—whether by choice, necessity, or simply because you’ve spent more time on the planet—your bucket will overflow. When it does, you experience overwhelm.

Remember: overwhelm can manifest physically as disease or symptoms; mentally as anxiety, depression, or other psychological disorders; and spiritually as a sense of generalized purposelessness or dissatisfaction with everyone and everything. Whatever your genetic predisposition or weak spot is, that’s likely to be the place or the way that overwhelm will announce itself.

On the other hand, if there’s room in your bucket, you have the capacity and space in your life to deal with the inevitable stresses that pop up as a matter of course. You’re better able to manage whatever comes your way in any given day or any given season of your life.

Creating and maintaining that extra room in your bucket is what prevents overwhelm over the long haul. That’s why it’s imperative to pay attention to, and deliberately curate, the contents of your bucket. If your bucket is filled with things that aren’t important to you, you don’t have room for what is truly important. Your marriage may add

some stressors to your bucket, but you want to be there for it. You want to devote time to your own long-term goals, even if taking time to work on them puts stress on your schedule.

Getting a handle on which stresses you *want* to remove and which you *can* remove, and then systematically removing them, ensures two things: that your energy is devoted to what matters most to you, and that you have room for the inevitable unanticipated stressors that life throws at you. When you have room available, those day-to-day curveballs don't have, or don't have as much of, a negative impact on your health and well-being. It changes the game.

Thinking about how full your bucket is and enumerating all of the stresses that you face day in and day out can be daunting at first, but it is actually the single most important thing that can be done to begin decreasing your sense of overwhelm. Once you can enumerate them, you will be able to identify many things that you can address with ease, making more room to deal with the more difficult stresses or the things that you simply cannot change.

What's in Your Bucket?

Stresses arise in a variety of domains common to the human experience: physical, mental, and emotional health; nutrition; environment; relationships; habits and lifestyle; and your current circumstances. How much stress you experience in each domain will vary dramatically from person to person based on your own history and situation. We will be diving into each of these domains in step 3.

It's literally impossible to get rid of all the things in your bucket that are adding to your burden, but the good news is that you don't have to. By examining what stresses you experience in each domain, it becomes easier to see both what is driving your overwhelm and where you can make the most effective changes with the least amount of effort. For example, for more restful sleep, there are a number of approaches that might work for you. You could decide to take the TV out of your bedroom, stop drinking caffeine after lunch, exercise more, use melatonin, or even take a prescription drug if that lines up with your values.



The Importance of Resilience

It's not just the number of things in your bucket or the magnitude of the stress you are experiencing that impact how overwhelmed you are. Another very important factor is resilience: your ability to handle stress, to deal with it and emerge intact—or even stronger—from it.

Typically, when we talk about what drives resilience, we think about positive forces in childhood. But there are plenty of adults who had wonderfully supportive parents and happy childhoods but seem unable to handle even a small amount of stress. Likewise, there are adults who had terribly difficult experiences in childhood and beyond but are incredibly resilient and seem to come back from major setbacks even stronger.

Based on what I've seen in my practice, I know that resilience is affected by the following four factors:

- Your genetic dispositions and personal history
- Your mindset
- Your brain chemistry
- The amount of available space in your bucket

You can't change your history. Your mindset and brain chemistry are things that can change, but you can't will them to do so on command. What you *can* do, though, right now, by working through this book, is create more room in your bucket. The more space you have, the more resilient you'll be.

For each of us, there are some things that are imperative to deal with at some point. I call these your nonnegotiables. A type-1 diabetic will have to take insulin; a person who wants to lose fat and put on muscle will need to exercise; someone with a history of severe mono-nucleosis will need eight hours of sleep a night (raising my hand here).

Learning what *your* own nonnegotiables are for your health and your life is paramount to getting your overall load down.

The Big, the Small, the Minutiae

The stresses in your bucket range from the obvious and acute to minor irritants so under the radar you may not even be aware of how they are affecting you. In conventional approaches to stress management, the stresses we think about managing are usually those arising from major life events and changes, such as a divorce, the death of a loved one, getting married, moving, starting school, a sick family member, work pressures, or other circumstances that are out of our control. These are the items on the famous Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory that's often reprinted in women's or health magazines.

No doubt these big, easy-to-identify stresses create a significant impact. But lurking quietly behind them are the stresses that seem too small to count—the ones that accumulate day to day, month to month, year to year, and over a lifetime. They are the daily issues and annoyances of life—dissatisfying interactions with people we encounter while at work or school or doing errands, or minor undone tasks. They can arise as a result of the choices we make about a plethora of things, including our food, our environment, our work, who we choose to spend time with, family dynamics, finances, and how we use our time.

Some of the things that affect us are common to many of us: relationship conflicts, dealing with bureaucracy or technology snafus, sitting at a desk all day, or doing taxes. Some of them are more specific to the individual: driving a car for a living if you have chronic back pain, too much sugar in your diet if you have high (or low) blood sugar, not enough sleep if you have migraines. Some are smaller and specific: an ingrown toenail keeping you from exercising, or eating ice cream if you're lactose intolerant. Or they are smaller and more universal: eating too much at dinner, forgetting to floss, or standing in a long line at the post office.

Then there is the really small stuff: a squeaky drawer, the missing button on your favorite shirt, a slow drain. Most people don't think about such trivial things as having any impact at all on their being