
Overwhelmed... or HELPLESS?

The Difference Matters



Bonnie Mincu, MA, MBA
Senior Certified ADHD Coach
www.thrivewithadd.com

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OVERWHELMED or HELPLESS?

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by Bonnie Mincu, MA, MBA,

It seems that everyone is feeling overwhelmed these days. For those of us with traits of ADD / ADHD, the problem is compounded.

When you have a problem, you want to find a solution. So it's likely you will seek a solution for "overwhelm." BUT... what if overwhelm isn't really the problem?

Overwhelm is Your Brain Saying: "TOO MUCH!"

Overwhelm happens when your brain feels overloaded... when your circuits shut down and shout "too much!"

To find a solution to this overwhelmed paralysis, you need to identify the problem: the stimulus, task or conditions that set it off.

Think about what exactly triggered that feeling of Overwhelm. Ask yourself "*Why am I overwhelmed at this moment?*" or "*What brought on this feeling?*"

Cognitive Overload – when your brain fools you

Some people with ADHD seem to have an overwhelm mechanism on overdrive. Their brain shouts "too much" when there really isn't very much to do at all. This can happen if your brain tends to suffer from cognitive overload based on the form in which information is presented.

- **Visual overwhelm** - If you tend to get visually overwhelmed, you might see three simple entries for the day in your calendar and suddenly feel panicky. But if you looked at each one individually, you'd realize that you won't have any problem at all fulfilling these appointments or tasks.

- **Too much to hear** - If you have a hard time taking in verbal direction without seeing it in writing, you may feel overwhelmed listening to just three things to do. Once you enter them in your laptop where you can SEE them, your brain calms down and you no longer feel the directions were too much.

Overwhelming To-Do Lists... or NO To-Do Lists

You may have To Do Lists that are overwhelming because they're so long... yet they don't really identify the do-able action steps. They might contain entire projects as well as random actions. You see an overwhelmingly long list without a clear way of getting through it.

Or you might feel overwhelmed because you don't have your To-Do's written down anywhere. You live with a constant low-level feeling of unease, worried that something will fall through the cracks.

Overwhelmed panic when reality hits

Your Overwhelm may come as a sudden realization that you have too much to do.

Perhaps you've taken on way more than is realistically possible to do, without your brain telling you to stop – until you hit the wall. With ADD / ADHD, this usually happens because you have a poor sense of time, or aren't in the habit of entering all your commitments in your calendar.

These were all potential triggers for getting overwhelmed. But what if Overwhelm wasn't really the problem? What if the Overwhelm was simply a reaction, triggered by something else altogether?

The Helplessness of Not Knowing

I've found that much of the time, when people with ADHD say they feel overwhelmed, the problem started because of them first feeling HELPLESS. That helplessness came about because of something that could be embodied by the phrase "*I don't know...*"

When there's something you DON'T KNOW – and you need to know it – you're likely to feel helpless. That feeling can either be mistaken for overwhelm, or trigger the *"it's too much"* feeling of overwhelm.

In cases like this, a meaningful solution needs to address the real problem – the thing that you don't know. When you really ask yourself why this problem persists, you may uncover the root cause of the difficulty. And that root cause indicates the ultimate solution you'll need.

Common triggers for feeling helpless:

- **I don't know where to start** – You need to learn the skill of breaking down projects and determining a logical starting point
- **I don't know where to find what I need** – If you've misplaced something, you need to make a list of logical places and search them. Ultimately, you need an organization system, or a habit of putting things away.
- **I don't know what to do** – Many things involving technology or software are explained online, or shown on YouTube. If you need specific guidance from a person, and you're reluctant to ask, you may have an issue with shame.
- **I don't know the direction, the purpose, or the answers** – You may have a project or assignment that's ambiguous, with unknown factors and questions. Divide these into categories of answers you can find online, and those where you must ask a person.
- **I don't know how to plan** – This is a very common cause for helplessness among people with ADD / ADHD. There are several skills involved in planning, none of which are taught in school. In addition, to plan realistically, you need to have a "time sense" to estimate how long different tasks will take to do.

INFO-GRAPHIC on the last page – This visual helps you quickly distinguish between Overwhelm and Helplessness when you feel paralyzed.

Clearly Overwhelm is not just one kind of problem with one simple solution. Your strategy in each instance will have to relate to whatever it was that triggered a sense of overwhelm at that time.

Overcoming the helplessness of not knowing what to do, where to find things, how to ask for answers and not knowing how to plan – all involve learnable skills. But where can you learn them?

Where to Learn the Skills...

I've developed a new training program for ADD / ADHD adults that will guide you through learning these skills, step by step, at your own pace.

The program is called "Productivity Pathfinder," launching in Fall 2017.

Each month, I'll guide you step by step towards achieving ADHD self-mastery.

As a Pathfinder member, you'll learn through a combination of live webinars and self-paced online training. You'll be supported with "Office Hours" call-in sessions and the community of fellow members.

It's an enormous value, at a low, affordable monthly fee.

To learn more, go to:
www.productivitypathfinder.com

SPECIAL PROMOTION for ADHD EXPO:

SAVE \$30 off first month in
Productivity Pathfinder.

Enter this PROMO CODE on the shopping cart page when you join:
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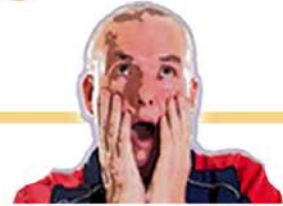
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SAVE \$30 with THIS CODE

Overwhelm vs Helplessness Info-graphic on next page...

Overwhelm vs Helplessness

Similar feelings, but different solutions



TOO MUCH DENSE TEXT

Print it out
Uncover just a bit at a time

TOO MUCH VERBAL DIRECTION



...and then I need you to blah, blah, blah blah, blah..

Write it down
Always have paper with you

OVERWHELM says
"It's too much"

TOO MANY TO-DO'S

Break them down into actionable steps
Create a short realistic list for the day or week

TOO MANY COMMITMENTS

Develop a sense of time based on reality
Learn to say: "I'll check my calendar and get back to you"



HELPLESSNESS starts with "I don't know..."

DON'T KNOW WHAT to DO

Afraid to ask?
Get help to deal with shame

DON'T KNOW DIRECTION or EXPECTATIONS

Communication unclear?
Learn active listening techniques to learn what's expected of you

DON'T KNOW WHERE to START

Learn techniques
Use process for sequencing, prioritizing decision-making

DON'T KNOW WHERE IT IS

List most likely places to look, search one by one
Get help to create organization
Develop ritual for putting things away in their assigned place

DON'T KNOW HOW to PLAN

Get training or coaching to learn planning skills

- Breaking down steps
- Working with calendar
- Creating timetable

