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Coach's Corner: Overwhelmed?

By: Sharon Pahlka , Journal Newspapers

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Do you try to squeeze too much into each day? Say "yes" too frequently? (Or when you really feel like saying "no?") Is your to-do list unrealistically long, but you can't figure out what to cut? More coming in daily? Do you feel overwhelmed? There are no pleasant synonyms for overwhelming: weighty, crushing, exhausting, oppressive, burdensome. No wonder we feel so tired and wasted when we are overwhelmed - certainly not at peak performance. So what to do?

I have been feeling overwhelmed lately, but I have been making progress in the past two weeks, thanks to a couple of ideas:

The first step in dealing with the overwhelming to-do list is to acknowledge that you can't do it all. Really. Make a huge to-do list with every possible thing, and you will see.

Instead, make a short list (three to five items) as your working list. Go down your big to-do list and ask, "What's the worst that would happen if I didn't do this at all? Or if I didn't do this for a month?" Ask yourself which items on the list you really want to do and would do right now if you had the time. Any item that will be a financial or health catastrophe if it is not done on time should go to the top of the short list. (Did I mention it is not helpful to procrastinate?) And be sure your short list contains at least one thing you really want to do. If your short list has projects with several steps, break those projects into bite-sized pieces and choose a couple steps for the short list.

Once you have your short list, finish it before starting another one. Accomplishing even one item helps you build momentum and feel less overwhelmed.

After you have made progress, take time to weed out your big list. Life's too short to be a slave to a to-do list. I had items on mine that were about as old as my prom dress cluttering my closet. Those are never going to happen, any more than I will get back into that dress. Why do I keep beating myself up with ancient to-do's? Solution: cross them off the list. (I have also promised myself to be a lot more careful about what I put on the long list in the future.)

Finally, deal with interruptions. I get distracted easily, so I have gotten serious about those chatty phone calls, unnecessary e-mails and other distractions that eat away my time. It is not always possible, but it helps a lot.

Dealing with feeling overwhelmed can make you feel better and be more productive too.

Coaching Question: Is your to-do list helping or hurting your productivity?

Coaching Tip: Stop the craziness and use your to-do list as a tool to help you be more productive while staying sane and balanced.

Homework: Sit down today and prioritize the three to five most important things on your to-do list, even giving a deadline. Be serious and keep distractions at bay.

Quotes: "Today I will, at least, finish the first task on my to-do list." John Watson

"Don't let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do." John Wooden

Sharon Pahlka is a life coach and speaker. In her coaching, she helps her clients live well and meaningfully, especially those with chronic health challenges. Sharon's column, Coach's Corner, offers helpful tips from her work.

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