

I work with leaders and managers in many differing types of organisations but one comment I hear regularly, from all levels is “I am overwhelmed!”. This has been common for many years but I think this may be yet another fall-out from Covid which is exacerbating this issue.

In modern business life, indeed perhaps in modern life generally, there simply isn't enough time to do all that is being asked of us, or all that we ask of ourselves. I wonder in fact if this hasn't always been the case. As soon as we move away from a very prescribed role where we are repeating very similar tasks in response to routine requests, we move into the territory of feeling overwhelmed. Being asked to accomplish more than the finite resources of our time, energy and attention allow. If you were offered additional tools or approaches to manage this, wouldn't you want to take them on?

What to do when feeling overwhelmed.

1. I believe Mindfulness can make an important contribution to better managing feelings of overwhelm . Mindfulness practices can give us the ability **to slow ourselves down**. This is a vital skill especially amidst a hectic life. Just paying attention to our breath or noticing our feet grounding us for a few seconds has the effect of taking us off the treadmill just long enough for us to notice and to sense more of what is around us, giving us that bigger picture, the context which can inform how we respond. Slowing down enables our physiology to change, dropping out of that adrenalin fuelled frenzy and beginning to move to a calmer state.
2. Seeing what is really in front of us, free from judgements and “stories”, can enable us to better understand what is being asked of us and what might be needed most. Often these are not the same things. Mindfulness gives us the ability to notice the stories, judgements, biases, and preferences that might otherwise sub-consciously shape our decisions. Having sight of them at least gives us the opportunity to better assess what is really ‘there’ and to decide what we really see as needed now.
3. Slowing down and being able to see better creates **a pause in activity**. That pause offers us the chance to create a little space amidst that activity. That space can be vital for us. As [Viktor Frankl](#) said

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

In our busy lives finding that space and that moment offers us the opportunity to see more options and to choose from them what we do next. Without it we are doomed to follow a reflex response, do what we always do which may be to just tick the next task off the list. This may **not** be our most effective choice in that moment. We want to move away from reacting (automatic) and move to responding (intentional). This helps us with feelings of overwhelm by enabling us to choose what we do next based on its impact or effectiveness in achieving more of what we are aiming for rather than slavishly doing that ‘next thing’.

1. Bringing a **beginner’s mind** to more of what we encounter further enables us to see new possibilities by freeing us from habitual responses. This in turn can encourage us to see recurring problems in a new light and thus create new responses to them. It might also enable us to see beyond the initial presenting problem to more underlying causes which in turn may remove or at least reduce the frequency and volume of those recurring issues, thus contributing to reducing our sense of overwhelm.
2. But perhaps the biggest contribution is an amalgamation of all of these aspects of mindfulness. By seeing what is truly in front of us in a calmer, less frenetic state we can begin to understand the true nature of overwhelm. If we continue to live in the fantasy that one day with more and more effort we will eventually get ‘on top of our to-do list’ overwhelm will be a near constant state for us. Being able to bring acceptance to understanding that we will, in most instances, never achieve that (because it IS a fantasy) enables us to see what overwhelm truly is a refusal to see that our responsibility is to better manage our commitments to others rather than just try to achieve everything in front of us. This will require prioritisation, choices, negotiations sometimes leading to declining requests and a greater more present sense of what our ‘north star’ is by which we navigate, often referred to as ‘purpose’. All of this is more likely to be achieved by those who can draw on mindfulness as a way of being and a way of leading.

Without the ability to notice, to pause, to see new options, to respond rather than just react, to choose and to do all of this from a place

of calmness and intention we will live in a near constant state of overwhelm.

Mindfulness, when part of our ways of being, with regular practice, can help us to counter that and live with greater ease and, I contend, to have more of the impact in the world we wish for.