

Managing work overload

By far the most common cause of workplace stress, that I hear, is work overload. This is backed up by national research by CIPD and others. I hear people say things like:

'I just have too much to do - it makes me anxious and fuzzy-headed.'

'My line manager [or my clients] think I'm always available and can always do more.'

'I feel bad when I can't get everything done on time or as well as I'd like to.'

If this sounds familiar and you want to address this issue for yourself, there are several components to dealing with it. These include:

1. Becoming more familiar with the **mindfulness-based tools** to reduce stress when it arises
2. Keeping your **sense of perspective** when it all feels too much
3. Reviewing your **lifestyle** and develop **self-care** habits – such as diet, exercise, sleep, and doing more of what you love
4. Learning how to **self-manage the workload** to get more done in a shorter time
5. Developing **clear boundaries and be assertive** when others expect too much of you

The first three areas are ones that you will be practising as part of the 8 week course. They form the basis for successful action on the last two; so don't jump ahead. The new material in this article therefore focuses on the last two areas.

Self-management of workload

I have 19 tips, from my own long experience as a consultant and from other sources.

1. **Use task lists.** If you're unclear what needs doing, how to do it, or what matters most, this creates confusion and stress. So create a table similar to the one below, with one row per sub-task. You might find a whiteboard is good for this, a simple table in Word or a spreadsheet (useful as you can sort columns by date needed), and/or use an app such as Todoist or Wunderlist. Keep the list updated every day, or week if you prefer, showing what's complete and what's urgent.

| Task | Sub task | Date established | Date required | Hours estimate | Dependencies |
|------------------------------|---|------------------|---------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
| Course outline for ABD Corp. | staff questionnaire design and send | 12-Aug | 18-Aug | 3 | agreed with client |
| Course outline for ABD Corp. | meet client and reps for scoping | | 25-Aug | 4 | agree dates available |
| Course outline for ABD Corp. | identify key issues and sign off | | 25-Aug | 3 | |
| Course outline for ABD Corp. | outline course content and sign off | | 28-Aug | 5 | |
| Course outline for ABD Corp. | prepare new materials | | 15-Sep | 15 | contact JC for expert input |
| Intro workshop at WMC | refine messages and web offer | 03-Sep | 15-Sep | 2 | agree content with WMC |
| Intro workshop at WMC | prepare web page and blog | | 18-Sep | 3 | |
| Intro workshop at WMC | launch on social media and direct to list | | 19-Sep | 5 | brief AW to help with soc med |
| Intro workshop at WMC | set up space and catering | | 03-Oct | 2 | brief to J2 |
| Intro workshop at WMC | refine takeaways and print x 50 | | 07-Oct | 2 | |
| Intro workshop at WMC | delivery day | | 10-Oct | 8 | |
| Intro workshop at WMC | follow up for further training options | | 12-Oct | 2 | agree strategy with WMC |

2. **Reduce 'noise'.** This both means literally sounds as well as other distractions. So set your phone to vibrate only (if on at all, see below), stop all computer alerts such as message tones, and agree quiet/ talking times with work colleagues. In shared workspace, make sure there is agreement on how, when and where phone calls and informal meetings happen. You may find that gentle music is useful to screen out other noise (as long as anyone close to you is ok with it).
3. **Turn off your phone and email.** Create quiet work times, when you can concentrate on a single task (see note below on multi-tasking). These might only be one hour, or perhaps even more – say until noon – and it's only after that time that you are freely available for others. Set up email auto-messages and voicemail messages explaining what you do – after a while your regular contacts will know when it's worth contacting you. At the very least, turn off automatic incoming emails – only get your mail manually when you're ready.
4. **Don't multi-task.** Maybe there are ten things that need your attention, but multi-tasking is proven to be inefficient, increasing task time by up to 40%. Do one thing at a time, do it well, then move on to the next. Your task list will tell you what takes priority (but you can change it if you need to).
5. **Have a work phone.** Have a separate phone for personal use, and turn off the work phone when you stop work.
6. **De-clutter.** Spend a few minutes at the end of the day clearing your workspace. You'll be pleased next day. Beware of flat surfaces – they attract junk. A clear space helps create a clear mind.
7. **Tell others.** Make it clear to others, especially line managers, why you're making these changes. Tell them it helps you get more done and that you can give people full attention when you're available (see more in the assertiveness section).
8. **Have a contingency plan.** Things do go wrong, and are often out of our control. So always have a back-up plan of useful things to do. When Plan A falls apart, stay in control; just tell everyone who needs to know what's happened, what you can do to address it, and get on with the next thing. Adjust the task list. This applies to traffic jams, cancelled trains, sick people, IT failures...etc.
9. **Get ahead.** Don't leave things to the last minute. Set your own deadlines before the times that other people define for you. The time gap equates to the task length, so for example if something that will take a half-day is due Friday 2pm, have it ready by Thursday evening. Send it and impress people. If you're way ahead, it's time for lunch with a friend.
10. **Get it right first time.** Do things well, not quickly. In the end it takes less time.
11. **Take breaks.** Full focus is not possible after 45 minutes. Get up, move around, juggle, make a coffee and savour it, give someone some care and attention, ie get other parts of your brain and body moving. You may come back with a new

perspective.

12. **Save and back-up often.** This may be obvious to most of us, but a loss of digital work can undo a lot of effort and create a lot of stress. Get your systems sorted – ideally backing up both on the cloud and on a physical hard drive. Get a surge protector.
13. **Reserve your best working time.** If you're a morning person, this is your critical few hours. If you're night owl, carve out your core focusing time then.
14. **Change how you do meetings.** Try meeting outside, standing up, or talking while walking. They will be quicker, friendlier and more fun. Agree to be kind. Leave your ego behind.
15. **Do the hard things first.** Don't put something off if it's hard. Prioritise your best and quietest time to do it.
16. . We all need breaks and distractions, as noted above. Get up for these. Don't do them at the workstation, especially social media and shopping! Better still, take a screen break when you do stop.
17. **Congratulate yourself.** When you've completed a task, well, celebrate. Do something nice for yourself. Share the good news. At the end of the day review what you've achieved or the good effort you've put in.
18. **Check your posture and breathing.** We easily slump or get 'pulled-in' to our pc, and can easily find that we're breathing shallowly. Ask yourself this simple question, often: 'how could I do this more easefully?' Adjust, breathe and carry on.
19. **Work with a buddy.** Share your concerns and celebrate your successes with someone else. If they've gone quiet, maybe they need you.

Establishing boundaries and being assertive

Being assertive means standing up for yourself, or others, and communicating what you think and feel, in a calm and positive way, without aggression.

If you develop these skills, you will be better able to get your point across without upsetting others, or becoming upset yourself.

Here are my 13 top tips:

1. **Be clear about your values, purpose and motivation.** The starting point for each of us is to be clear about what we're on the planet for, and how this translates into daily actions and responses. If this underpins what you do, how and why, and you're pretty sure you feel right about it, you'll be much more confident in communicating with others. (Do the values exercise in this Module).

2. **Speak up.** Don't be passive, or let bad habits become entrenched or resentment build. Whilst staying friendly, challenge anything that seems wrong to you as soon as it happens. This could be about what you're being asked to do, or how you're being asked. If you stay quiet, the person in question will probably assume that everything is ok.
3. **Don't get angry.** If you feel anger rising or one of your buttons gets pushed, pause! The brain's fear gauge (the amygdala) is a crude assessor yet it can instantly trigger stress hormones, that inhibit your rational thinking (the pre-frontal cortex), and you may react aggressively, literally before you know it. Then the problem escalates as the other person experiences the same brain chemistry. Learn to recognise tensions rising in your body (your early warning system), pause, take a couple of mindful breaths, recalibrate, and carry on (this employs the mindfulness techniques you learnt in Module 1).
4. **Be honest.** No-one is good at everything, and we may lack skills or experience needed for a particular assignment. It's much better to own up to this right away. After all, the person who's asking you to do the task may not be clear themselves about what's really needed. Start a creative dialogue about the task and any skills you need to develop, or help needed. Challenge the task's purpose creatively and you may find a more effective way to meet the objective.
5. **Clarify what's possible and ask for what you need.** For example if your line manager or a client asks you to have the work done by the end of tomorrow and you know that will not be possible time-wise, just ask for more time. That will show that you are responsible and reliable, which is much better than saying yes and then not delivering on time.
6. **Know your strengths.** If you're often asked to do things that you're not great at, and if your best skills are not being used, it will undermine your motivation. Talk to your line manager if this is happening, as they may not know this.
7. **Listen well, and ask well.** Mindful listening skills are critical for both parties where a problem may be arising. Both parties need to make sure that they understand the views and needs of each other, without interruption or jumping-in with a reactive response. Part of good listening is enquiry, where you ask for more clarification or go deeper into anything where mis-communication is a risk (Mindful listening is explored in Module 3).
8. **Develop your emotional intelligence.** What's 'right' to you is of course not always a shared view. With good listening, and respect for the person you're talking to, try to see the issue from the other person's point of view, and intuit what they are feeling. Hence the need to practice empathy and build emotional intelligence (which we cover in the 8 week course).
9. **Show gratitude.** When someone has made a real effort to accommodate your needs, show appreciation. Line management can be a lonely and stressful activity, so bosses need to be thanked too! (See the gratitude exercises in the 8 week course).

10. **Assess what's possible.** Be your own expert. Plan what really can be done, with a realistic review of the time, resources and skills available. Show that you have given this some thought and invite a discussion. Be open to useful suggestions.
11. **Call out bullies.** Where you judge that someone is behaving unreasonably, be courageous and tell them how you feel. They may be unaware of the impact they are having on you. However, if things continue in the same way, you need to go higher up and ask for mediation. Most issues will resolve if all parties understand the problem and employ the skills we outline above.
12. **Have compassion for everyone.** We all have bad days, bad weeks, get sick, get stressed and have other problems in our lives. See through the behaviour and step into the shoes of the other person. Being compassionate, for yourself and others, is a great healer (see the kindness and compassion exercises in Module 3).
13. **Put work into perspective.** If you draw a 3x3 table about the main things in your life, put your work into one of the boxes. What's in the other eight? How much attention and energy, how much of yourself, are you giving them? How is the work box affecting all the others? Work occupies most of our weekdays, so it's a big thing, but if you imagine looking back on your dying day, what would you wish you'd done more of? What will you change, starting today?