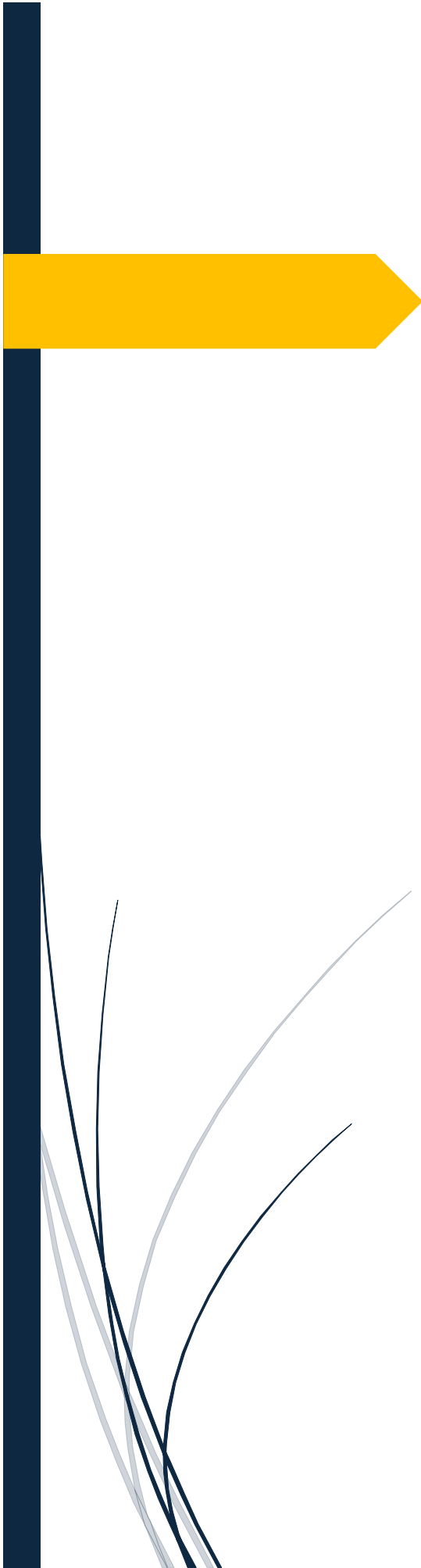




Stress, Overwhelm & Burnout

When Demand Exceeds Capacity

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Stress is part of being human. Responsibilities, relationships, work, parenting, finances, health, uncertainty, transitions, and everyday demands all require something from us.

Our systems are designed to respond to stress. The problem isn't necessarily **having stress**.

The problem develops when the demands placed on us consistently exceed the resources, capacity, and recovery available to manage them.

A useful way to think about stress is: **DEMANDS ↔ CAPACITY ↔ RECOVERY**

When these remain reasonably balanced, we can usually adapt.

When demands increase while capacity and recovery remain the same—or decrease—we may begin moving from: **Stress → Overwhelm → Depletion → Burnout**

Instead of asking only: “**How do I handle stress better?**”

Try asking:

- **What is being demanded of me?**
 - **What capacity do I actually have right now?**
 - **What is restoring me?**
 - **What needs to change?**
-

Stress Is Not Always the Problem

Stress can be useful.

A moderate amount of stress can help us:

- | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| • Focus | • Meet deadlines | • Perform |
| • Prepare | • Solve problems | • Adapt |
| • Respond to challenges | • Learn | • Protect ourselves |

Stress tells the system: “**Something requires attention.**”

Ideally, the demand eventually decreases and the system has an opportunity to recover.

Demand → Response → Resolution → Recovery

But sometimes the demand doesn't stop. Or another demand arrives before we've recovered from the first. The cycle becomes: **Demand → Response → More Demand → More Response → Less Recovery**

Eventually, we may be operating from a system that is still functioning but increasingly depleted.

Stress vs. Overwhelm vs. Burnout

These experiences overlap, but it can be useful to distinguish them.

STRESS

“There is a lot to manage.”

Stress often occurs when demands require additional physical, cognitive, emotional, or relational resources.

We may still feel capable of responding, but the system is working harder.

OVERWHELM

“There is more to manage than I currently have capacity for.”

Overwhelm happens when the number, intensity, complexity, or duration of demands exceeds our available resources.

We may struggle to determine:

- What matters most
- Where to start
- What can wait
- What needs attention
- What we can realistically accomplish

Everything begins competing for the same limited capacity.

BURNOUT

“I've been operating beyond capacity for too long.”

Burnout is more than having a difficult week.

It can emerge after prolonged exposure to demands without enough recovery, resources, control, support, or meaningful relief.

We may begin to feel:

- | | | |
|------------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| • Physically exhausted | • Irritable | • Disconnected from |
| • Emotionally depleted | • Less effective | things that previously |
| • Detached | • Less motivated | mattered |
| • Cynical | | |

What once felt difficult may begin to feel impossible.

Capacity Changes

One of the most important things to understand about capacity is: **Capacity is not fixed.**

The amount you can carry today may be different from what you could carry last month, last year, or during another season of life.

Capacity can be influenced by:

PHYSICAL

- Sleep
- Illness
- Pain
- Nutrition
- Exercise
- Hormonal changes
- Medication
- Physical exhaustion

COGNITIVE

- Number of decisions
- Information overload
- Complexity
- Attention demands
- Executive functioning
- Uncertainty
- Constant problem-solving

EMOTIONAL

- Anxiety
- Grief
- Conflict
- Fear
- Depression
- Trauma
- Worry
- Emotional labor

RELATIONAL

- Parenting
- Caregiving
- Relationship strain
- Family conflict
- Supporting others
- Workplace dynamics
- Lack of support

ENVIRONMENTAL

- Noise
- Crowding
- Commuting
- Technology
- Interruptions
- Lack of privacy
- Unpredictability
- Constant stimulation

LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

- Financial pressure
- Job changes
- Moving
- Divorce
- Health concerns
- Parenting transitions
- Loss
- Major decisions

Sometimes we judge ourselves using the capacity we **used to have**. “**I used to be able to handle this.**”

That may be true. But the more useful question is: “**What capacity do I actually have right now?**”

The Capacity Equation

When people feel overwhelmed, the instinct is often: “**I need to become better at handling everything.**”

Sometimes that helps. But there are actually two sides to the equation:

DEMANDS = What is being required of me?

and

RESOURCES = What do I have available to meet those demands?

If: **DEMANDS > RESOURCES** the system will eventually struggle.

This means reducing overwhelm isn't only about increasing resilience.

Sometimes we need to: **Decrease demands.**

Sometimes we need to: **Increase resources.**

Usually we need some combination of both.

What Is Taking From You?

Not all demands are obvious.

Some are visible:

- Work
- Parenting
- School
- Caregiving
- Chores
- Appointments
- Finances

Others quietly consume capacity.

COGNITIVE LOAD

- Remembering.
- Planning.
- Organizing.
- Anticipating.
- Scheduling.
- Tracking.
- Decision-making.
- Problem-solving.

EMOTIONAL LOAD

- Worrying about someone.
- Managing conflict.
- Holding grief.
- Monitoring another person's emotions.
- Trying not to disappoint people.
- Feeling responsible for everyone's experience.

RELATIONAL LOAD

- Maintaining relationships.
- Navigating difficult personalities.
- Supporting others.
- Resolving conflict.
- Feeling disconnected.
- Managing family expectations.

ENVIRONMENTAL LOAD

- Noise.
- Clutter.
- Crowding.
- Traffic.
- Technology.
- Notifications.
- Lack of privacy.
- Constant interruption.

INTERNAL LOAD

- Perfectionism.
- Self-criticism.
- People-pleasing.
- Comparison.
- Rumination.
- Unrealistic expectations.
- Trying to control things outside your control.

A demand doesn't have to appear on a calendar to consume capacity.

Find Your Load

Consider what is currently taking energy from your system.

- WORK / SCHOOL
- RELATIONSHIPS

- FAMILY / PARENTING
- HEALTH
- FINANCES
- ENVIRONMENT
- EMOTIONAL LOAD
- COGNITIVE LOAD
- EXPECTATIONS I PLACE ON MYSELF

Now ask: **Which three are consuming the most capacity?**

The Third Variables

Sometimes the thing we believe is causing the problem isn't the only thing influencing it.

You may think: **“My partner is irritating me.”**

But you also slept five hours.

You may think: **“I hate my job.”**

But you've been working without meaningful recovery for three months.

You may think: **“My kids are driving me crazy.”**

But you haven't had time alone in several days.

You may think: **“I'm becoming lazy.”**

But you're carrying grief, financial stress, poor sleep, and uncertainty simultaneously.

These are **third variables**.

They don't mean the original problem isn't real.

They mean the system contains more variables than we sometimes recognize.

Ask: **“What else is influencing how I'm experiencing this?”**

Signs Your System May Be Overloaded

Overload doesn't always look like panic.

Sometimes it looks like:

BODY

- Fatigue
- Muscle tension
- Headaches
- Poor sleep
- Restlessness
- Feeling physically heavy
- Gastrointestinal changes
- Frequent illness
- Difficulty relaxing

MIND

- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Indecision
- Mental fog
- Rumination
- Difficulty prioritizing
- Feeling scattered
- Small decisions feeling unusually difficult

EMOTIONS

- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Frustration
- Numbness
- Feeling emotionally thin
- Reduced patience
- Tearfulness
- Feeling easily activated

BEHAVIOR

- Procrastinating
- Withdrawing
- Avoiding
- Doom scrolling
- Working longer
- Exercising less
- Increased alcohol/substance use
- Eating differently
- Neglecting self-care

RELATIONSHIPS

- Shorter temper
- Less curiosity
- Less affection
- Less patience
- More conflict
- Less desire for connection
- Feeling responsible for everyone
- Wanting everyone to leave you alone

Sometimes the behavior we criticize is actually a **signal of reduced capacity**.

Overwhelm Shrinks the Window

When our system becomes overloaded, our tolerance for additional demands often becomes smaller.

Things we normally manage well can suddenly feel difficult.

- A minor request feels enormous.
- A child's question feels irritating.
- An email feels threatening.
- A partner's concern feels like criticism.
- A simple decision feels impossible.

This doesn't necessarily mean the situation became larger.

Our available capacity became smaller.

Imagine a glass. When the glass is mostly empty, another ounce isn't particularly important.

When the glass is already full, **one additional drop can cause overflow**. This helps explain why our biggest reactions sometimes occur in response to relatively small events. The final event isn't always the whole problem.

Sometimes it is simply: **The last demand added to an already overloaded system.**

Burnout Can Look Like Disconnection

Burnout doesn't always look like collapsing. Sometimes people continue functioning. They go to work.

Take care of children. Attend meetings. Pay bills. Complete tasks. But internally something begins switching off.

You may notice less:

- | | | |
|--------------|-------------------|--------------|
| • Curiosity | • Patience | • Hope |
| • Creativity | • Pleasure | • Initiative |
| • Empathy | • Connection | |
| • Motivation | • Sexual interest | |

The system begins conserving resources. This can create an important misunderstanding: **“I don't care anymore.”** Sometimes the more accurate statement is: **“I don't currently have enough capacity to care in the way I normally do.”** That distinction matters.

What Can I Control?

When everything feels important, overwhelm tells us: “**Do everything.**”

Instead, sort the demands.

- **CONTROL** the things I can directly change.
- **INFLUENCE** the things I may be able to affect but cannot completely control.
- **ACCEPT / ADAPT** to things I cannot currently change and may need to work around.

This helps prevent spending limited capacity trying to control things that aren't controllable.

Reduce the Load

Not every problem needs another coping strategy. Sometimes something needs to **stop**.

Look at your current demands and ask:

- **ELIMINATE** what doesn't actually need to happen.
- **REDUCE** what can happen less often, less intensely, or at a lower standard?
- **DELAY** what matters but doesn't need to happen now?
- **DELEGATE** what can someone else do?
- **RENEGOTIATE** what expectation, deadline, responsibility, role, or agreement needs to change?
- **BOUNDARY** what am I continuing to carry because I haven't said no?
- **ACCEPT** what cannot currently be changed and requires adaptation rather than continued fighting?

Reducing demands is not failure. Sometimes it is good system management.

Good Enough

Overload and perfectionism can become powerful partners. When capacity decreases but expectations remain unchanged, the system works harder to maintain the same standard.

Eventually: **Less capacity + same expectations = greater strain**

Ask:

- **Does this need to be excellent?**
- **Does this need to be good?**
- **Does this simply need to be done?**

Not every task deserves your highest level of effort.

Sometimes **good enough protects capacity for what actually matters.**

Increase Your Resources

Reducing demands is one side of the equation. The other is increasing resources.

Resources can include:

PHYSICAL RESOURCES

- Sleep
- Nutrition
- Movement
- Exercise
- Medical care
- Rest

COGNITIVE RESOURCES

- Lists
- Calendars
- Reminders
- Routines
- Automation
- Breaking tasks into smaller steps
- Reducing decisions

EMOTIONAL RESOURCES

- Therapy
- Journaling
- Regulation
- Time alone
- Reflection
- Self-compassion
- Emotional expression

RELATIONAL RESOURCES

- Partner
- Friends
- Family
- Coworkers
- Community
- Professional support

ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES

- Quiet
- Privacy
- Outdoors
- Organized spaces
- Reduced stimulation
- Technology boundaries

PRACTICAL RESOURCES

- Money
- Childcare
- Transportation
- Flexible scheduling
- Paid services
- Delegation
- Time

Ask: **What resource would make the biggest difference right now?**

Recovery Is Not the Same as Stopping

Sometimes we stop working without actually recovering.

We finish work and immediately begin:

- Scrolling.
- Watching the news.
- Answering messages.
- Managing children.
- Completing chores.
- Thinking about tomorrow.
- Solving another problem.

Our body stopped one activity. Our system never stopped processing demands. Recovery is anything that helps restore capacity.

That might include:

- | | | |
|------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| • Sleep | • Connection | • Meditation |
| • Quiet | • Solitude | • Doing nothing |
| • Movement | • Exercise | • Completing something satisfying |
| • Nature | • Creativity | |
| • Music | • Sex/intimacy | |
| • Play | • Humor | |

The important question isn't: **“Am I taking breaks?”**

It is: **“Does what I'm doing actually restore me?”**

Diversify Recovery

Just as we benefit from having diverse capabilities and diverse ways of connecting, we benefit from having **multiple ways to recover**.

If your only recovery strategy is: **Vacation** you may wait months for relief.

If your only strategy is: **Exercise** injury or illness can remove it.

If your only strategy is: **Your partner** their availability determines your recovery.

Build options across different levels.

- **5 MINUTES:** What can restore me a little?
- **30 MINUTES:** What helps me reset?
- **A FEW HOURS:** What genuinely restores capacity?
- **A DAY:** What helps me reconnect with myself?
- **WHO FILLS MY CUP:** Who contributes to increasing my feel good chemicals?
- **A DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENT:** Where can I go that refreshes me?
- **LONGER RESET:** What periodically helps me step outside my normal demands?

Recovery works better when it is **built into life rather than reserved for emergencies.**

Protect vs. Prepare

Some stress can be reduced. Some cannot.

For demands that can be changed: **PROTECT**

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|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| • Set boundaries | • Delegate | • Remove unnecessary demands |
| • Reduce commitments | • Change expectations | |
| • Say no | | |

For demands that cannot currently be removed: **PREPARE**

- | | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------|--|
| • Increase support | • Reduce competing demands | • Identify predictable stress points |
| • Create routines | | |
| • Protect sleep | • Ask for help | • Create a plan before capacity disappears |
| • Plan recovery | | |

We can't always eliminate the storm. Sometimes the work is making sure we aren't walking into it without resources.

The Minimum Dose

When capacity is significantly reduced, the normal version of your day may no longer be realistic.

Instead of abandoning everything, identify the **minimum dose.**

- **BODY:** What is the minimum I need to do to care for my body today?
- **RESPONSIBILITIES:** What genuinely must happen today?
- **CONNECTION:** Who or what do I want to remain connected to?
- **RECOVERY:** What small thing could restore some capacity?
- **TOMORROW:** What can safely wait?

A reduced-capacity day doesn't require a full-capacity performance.

From “What's Wrong With Me?” to “What's Happening to My System?”

When we're overwhelmed, we often make the experience personal.

- “I'm lazy.”
- “I'm failing.”
- “I should be able to handle this.”
- “Other people manage more than I do.”
- “I used to be better at this.”

Try replacing judgment with investigation.

- Instead of: “**Why can't I handle this?**”
 - Ask: “**What am I carrying?**”
- Instead of: “**Why am I so unmotivated?**”
 - Ask: “**What has depleted my capacity?**”
- Instead of: “**Why am I irritated with everyone?**”
 - Ask: “**How much room does my system currently have for another person's needs?**”
- Instead of: “**What's wrong with me?**”
 - Ask: “**What's happening within and around me?**”

Curiosity creates information. Information gives us more choices.

Build Your Capacity Map

Take a snapshot of your current system.

DEMANDS: What is currently required the most from me?

CAPACITY: What is my actual capacity right now?

Low ——— Moderate ——— High

What is affecting it?

DRAINS: What is quietly consuming resources?

RECOVERY: What is currently restoring me?

MISSING: What support, structure, time, or resources do I need more of?

REDUCE: What could I eliminate, reduce, delay, delegate, or renegotiate?

PROTECT: What boundary would protect some capacity?

PREPARE: What unavoidable demand do I need to prepare for?

NEXT STEP: What is one realistic change I can make?

When Stress Becomes More Than Stress

Stress, overwhelm, burnout, anxiety, and depression can overlap. Sometimes reducing demands and increasing recovery is enough to help the system recalibrate.

Other times, additional support is needed.

Consider professional support when stress or burnout becomes persistent, significantly interferes with daily functioning, contributes to substantial anxiety or depression, increases reliance on alcohol or other substances, or feels increasingly difficult to manage independently.

If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide or believe you may be in immediate danger, seek immediate professional or emergency support.

Final Reflection

Stress isn't always evidence that something is wrong with you.

Sometimes it is information about the relationship between: **what life is demanding** and **what your system currently has available**.

When you notice yourself becoming overwhelmed, ask:

- **What am I carrying?**
- **What is consuming capacity?**
- **What has changed about my capacity?**
- **What can I eliminate?**
- **What can I reduce?**
- **What can I delay?**
- **What can I delegate?**
- **What needs to be renegotiated?**
- **Where do I need a boundary?**
- **What resources are missing?**
- **What actually restores me?**
- **What can I protect against?**
- **What do I need to prepare for?**

And perhaps most importantly: **What doesn't have to be carried right now?**

You don't always need to become better at carrying more.

Sometimes the healthier response is to **change the load**.