

Part One

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Why You Feel So Overworked and Overwhelmed

Does Any of This Sound Familiar?

At a breakfast joint in L.A., my friend John was telling me about the first full day of his business trip to the West Coast. John and his partner own a successful strategy consulting firm that they started in 2009 right in the teeth of the Great Recession. Since then, through business savvy and a lot of hard work, they've acquired an impressive list of clients and built a team of 10 really smart people. Much of their success can be attributed to days like the one John had the day before our breakfast meeting.

What You'll Learn in This Chapter:

- Why you feel overworked and overwhelmed
 - Why things feel crazier lately
 - Why being present matters and what you can do about it
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“So, here’s my day yesterday,” he began. “I’m up at 6:00 AM and in the rental car by 7:00 AM for a drive from my hotel in West Hollywood to an 8:30 meeting in East L.A. Of course, that drive could be anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour and a half depending on the traffic on the freeways. About 20 minutes into the drive, I hear, ‘Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!’ It’s the phone. I get on a conference call while I’m driving that includes a client dialing in from Denmark. I sort of have this out-of-body experience while I’m driving, thinking, ‘How absurd is this that I’m driving at 7:30 AM somewhere in L.A. while I’m talking to people in D.C. and Denmark?’ So, the call finishes, and I get to East L.A. a few minutes before the meeting begins. It’s an all-day session to close out a big project with a major client. Fortunately, it goes well, and by the end of the day, we’ve probably won some new business. Handshakes all around, and I get back in the car just after 4:00 PM. Now I’m driving a colleague to catch a flight back to D.C. out of LAX because she needs to get back to run a marathon on Saturday. Drop her off, take a deep breath, and am finally ready to chill a little bit on the drive back to the hotel in West Hollywood. Then I hear, ‘Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!’ It’s the phone. A guy on the team in D.C. is setting up an emergency conference call to go over a spreadsheet that’s critical to another client project. God, it was painful. We go over that spreadsheet cell by cell as I’m navigating the [12 lanes! Be careful, John!] 405 freeway. Finally, I get back to the hotel around 6:30 PM. Grab some dinner. Answer e-mails and prep for today’s meetings. Go to bed at 11:00 PM. Typical day on the road.”

I had two reactions to John’s story. First, I felt bad about asking him to come out to meet me for an 8:00 AM breakfast 45 minutes from his hotel after the day he’d just had. (He was right on time, by the way.) Second, I asked him if I could share his story in this book because it’s the perfect representation of what I mean by overworked and overwhelmed.

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If my math is right, John clocked around a 17-hour workday as he talked with colleagues and clients, drove around L.A., solved problems, delivered on commitments, developed new business, did favors for friends, responded to requests, stayed current with what was going on, and prepped for the next day's work. And, oh yeah, and found time to feed himself.

Don't get me wrong. Not every single day is like that for John and other high-capacity professionals like him, but many are. Perhaps your typical day doesn't include taking meetings and conference calls all over Los Angeles but is more like Monica Oswald's daily routine:

Monica is a well-respected vice president in a well-known financial services company. She is also a mom with a full and busy life. She and her husband have two kids—a daughter about to graduate from high school and a son in middle school. Her typical day starts at 5:00 AM. She gets up an hour or so ahead of the rest of the family for some "quiet time" while she perhaps does some things in the kitchen or the laundry so, as she told me, she "can get things going" for the day. Of special attention is organizing things for her seventh-grade son, who has a mild learning disability. Monica makes sure "that everything is all where it needs to be so he can pick up and go in the morning."

Her next move is to drop her son off at the bus stop, and then she's in her office between 7:00 and 7:30 AM. She tries to take the first 60 to 90 minutes of the workday to organize herself, answer e-mails, make follow-up calls, review her calendar, and set her priorities for the day. At 8:30 or 9:00 AM, the meetings begin and pretty much continue throughout the day. As we'll hear more about from Monica later in this book, she takes a 20-minute walk outside or around the building around midday to get a physical and mental break from sitting in conference rooms.

If no evening events are planned at work, she's typically home by 6:00 PM, unless one of the kids has a school event. If not, then it's dinner and helping her son with his homework. She tries to wrap

things up by 9:00 PM, check a few e-mails, and attend to anything she needs to with the goal of being in bed by 10:00 PM and asleep by 11:00 PM. Then, as she told me, “it starts again.”

Like I said, a full and busy life. Don’t get me wrong; from talking with her, I can tell that Monica loves her family, her job, and her life. Still, that’s a lot to keep up with on a daily basis.

As I’ve been working on this book, I’ve been sharing some ideas from it with clients and friends who, like John and Monica, are in demanding leadership or other professional roles. When I share the title of the book with them, it’s usually what I call a Jerry McGuire moment—“You had me at hello.” As soon as most people hear the first three words of the title, *Overworked and Overwhelmed*, the reaction is something along the lines of “When can I read it?” or “Can I read it while you’re writing it?” My favorite response was from an executive who, when she heard the title, exclaimed, “Oh my gosh, if I had that book, I’d jump in bed with it and not get out until I finished it!”

The Situations You Find Yourself In . . .

If you’re reading this book, chances are you feel the same way (although I won’t press you on where you’re reading it). Why is it that so many professionals feel so overworked and overwhelmed? If you’re like almost all the people I work with, it’s because your calendar is racked and stacked with very little white space between all of the work, family, and community commitments on your plate. But is that calendar the cause or the effect of being overworked and overwhelmed?

These are questions I’ve been paying a lot of attention to over the past five or six years. During that time, I’ve given an average of 40 to 50 presentations a year to groups of high-potential and senior leaders who read my first book, *The Next Level: What Insiders Know About Executive Success*. When I first wrote that book, the next level I most

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had in mind was making the transition from manager to a more senior manager or executive role. That's clearly a next-level situation, but the more I talked with people, the more I realized that just about everyone in executive, managerial, or other high-capacity professional roles is experiencing next-level situations on an almost continuous basis, whether they've been recently promoted or not.

Let's say we have a roomful of 100 professionals, managers, or executives, and I ask them to raise their hand if they've experienced the following scenarios in the past year:

- *Promotion?* That's usually around 20 percent of the hands.
- *In the same job you were in a year ago but the scope has gotten a lot bigger?* That'll be around 50 percent of the hands.
- *Working in a situation where the performance bar is significantly higher than a year ago?* Ninety to 100 percent of the hands go up.
- *Operating in a rapidly changing competitive environment?* That's 100 percent of the hands.

So, if you're doing the math at home, you've realized that most people are raising their hand more than once. Many of them are raising their hand three and even four times.

. . . And the Denominator They Have in Common

So what do those scenarios have in common that make all of them next-level situations? In all four cases—promotion, increased scope, higher performance bar, and changing competitive environment—different results are expected. When you have to get different results, you need to take different actions. For the majority of leaders and other professionals, their circumstances are compelling them to make lots of changes at once on a nearly continuous basis. Sounds like a pretty good prescription for being overworked and overwhelmed.

The Next Level 360-degree assessments and self-assessments we've run with thousands of managers and executives over the past five years bear this out. When you look at the highest-rated behaviors, they include words like *taking accountability*, *being clear about outcomes*, *making timely decisions*, and *correcting mistakes*. It looks a lot like the results for the group whose story I shared in the Introduction, and it's almost always the same story: It's all about getting stuff done.

When you look at the lowest-rated behaviors—the ones that leaders and their colleagues agree they don't do so well—the phrases that come up again and again are *managing my workload*, *taking time to step back to define or redefine what needs to be done*, *giving others my full presence and attention*. The behavior that is invariably the lowest rated is *pacing myself by building in regular breaks from work*. If you're reading this book and you're at all similar to the thousands of leaders who have participated in this assessment, the likelihood is that your results would be the same. That's why you feel overworked and overwhelmed.

Why It Feels Crazy Lately

Does it feel like it's gotten worse over the past several years? Most of the people I talk to and work with feel like it has. What's going on in the bigger picture that's driving this? I think there are two macro factors at play. The first is that the corporate restructuring that began with the retrenchment of the Great Recession of 2008 hasn't stopped. As companies downsized to deal with the financial crisis, they learned how to do more with less. That dynamic is enabled by the speed and efficiency of the Internet and other technologies, along with giving more responsibilities to the people who remain. And the people who remain are dealing with the blessing and the curse of the second big factor that emerged in the same period: the rise of the smartphone. The iPhone was introduced in June 2007. As I write this in 2014, there are more than 1 billion smartphones in use around the world.

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According to the *MIT Technology Review*, smartphones have had one of the fastest penetration rates of any technology ever introduced.¹ It took only about two and a half years for the smartphone to reach 40 percent market penetration in the United States, compared with around 14 years for the personal computer and 39 years for the Alexander Graham Bell telephone.

And what does the smartphone enable all of us to do? Yes, we can take pictures and share them on Instagram and settle arguments at the bar or dinner table by whipping out the phone and finding the right answer on Google. That can be fun, but the smartphone also enables us to work—all the time. A survey of executives, managers, and professionals (EMPs) conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership in 2013 shows that the typical smartphone-carrying EMP is interacting with work an average of 72 hours a week.² That's 43 percent of the 168 hours that are in a week. So, you may be thinking, "Well, that still leaves 57 percent of the week available for other things. That's not so bad." Before you get too excited, though, as the pie chart in Figure 1.1 suggests, you may want to take around eight hours a day for eating, sleeping, and bathing (at least I hope so). When you take the working and personal care out of the mix, that leaves just 24 percent, or 40 hours, of your week available for everything else you want or have to do.

It's no wonder you feel overworked and overwhelmed! In an interview for this book, Teresa Amabile, Harvard Business School professor and coauthor of *The Progress Principle*, summed things up nicely:

Work is now part of everything we do. We're never away from it. We really have to go to extremes to get away from it. There used to be much clearer demarcations between work and nonwork time. I think because of technology we've come to have higher expectations of each other and of ourselves and of our organizations.

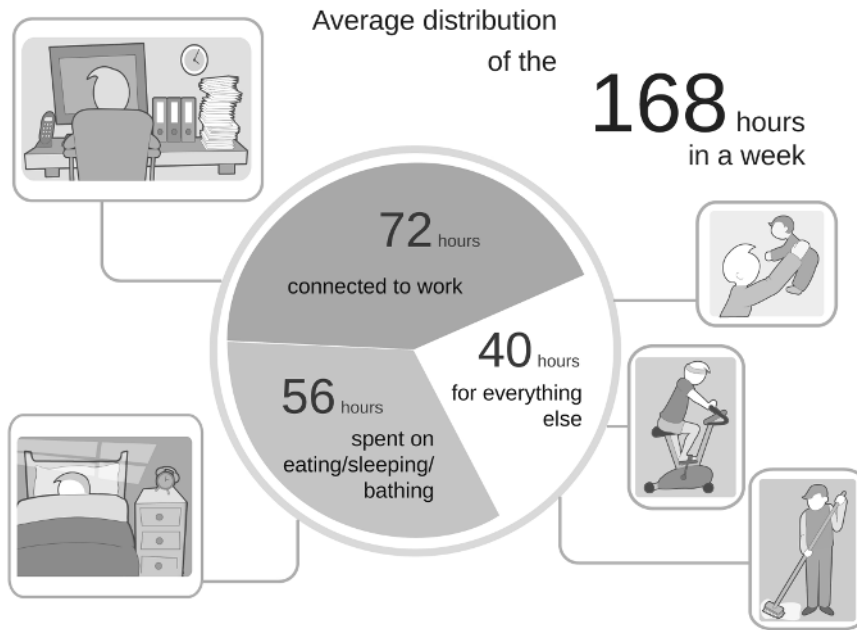


Figure 1.1 Your 168 Hours a Week: Where Do They Go?

Those higher expectations lead to the stress that comes from feeling overworked and overwhelmed. The American Psychological Association's (APA) 2013 Stress Study shows that 33 percent of Americans feel extreme stress and that 48 percent of Americans report their stress has gone up in the past five years.³ When people were asked why their stress was up, work was the number one reason; concerns about money ranked number two. Those two factors combined were cited by 76 percent of survey participants. When it comes to managing stress, only 29 percent think they do a good job of it and 83 percent think it affects their health. They're right about that last point. According to the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital, between 60 and 90 percent of visits to the doctor are prompted by stress-related complaints.⁴

Even if you're not going to the doctor because of it, there's likely a lot going on in your average day that creates that stress-inducing feeling of being overworked and overwhelmed. For instance, if you're a manager or an executive, according to a January 2012 *Smart Brief on Leadership* reader poll, there's a 96 percent likelihood that you overcommit yourself and your team at least some of the time.⁵ You may be a part of the 42 percent who say they overcommit themselves and their teams pretty much all the time. If you're not one of those overcommitting managers or execs, then there's a fair chance you're working for one. Statistics like these make you wonder what kind of self-esteem payoff such overcommitment creates.

Even if you're not a manager or executive, you're almost certainly a professional who uses e-mail. If that's the case, based on the findings of a University of California at Irvine study, you're switching screens on your computer an average of 37 times an hour.⁶ That's a screen switch about every 90 seconds. Makes it hard to focus, doesn't it? Another possible reason for lack of focus and a feeling of being overwhelmed is that you deal with a lot of interruptions during the day. A 2011 study out of the Netherlands showed that the engineers in the study were interrupted for an average of 96 minutes a day.⁷ What were they able to get done in the midst of all those interruptions? Not as much as they hoped. The urgent and less important work was more likely to be completed than the important work.

Of course, it's not all about work. There are likely other factors in your life that could be making you feel overwhelmed. Another look at the 2013 APA Stress Study suggests what some of those factors might be. Following work pressure and money, the next top five reasons that cause people to feel stressed are health (a vicious circle on that one, huh?), relationships, poor nutrition, media overload (thanks again, smartphone), and sleep deprivation. Sigh.

You Must Be Present to Win

Enough with the statistics; you get the point. If all of these factors sound really familiar, you may even be feeling a little more overworked and overwhelmed at the moment. If that's the case, I apologize. Let's take a few deep breaths (seriously, take a few deep breaths), switch gears, and start focusing on alternatives.

In my line of work as an executive coach and leadership educator, I'm in a lot of conversations about leadership presence. It's sort of the holy grail for leaders these days. Leadership presence is one of those things that everyone wants to exhibit but is hard to define. Believing that it's easier to coach to something for which there is a clear definition, I offered a simple explanation of leadership presence in my first book, *The Next Level*. Based on experience and observation, I believe leadership presence is composed of three big categories of behaviors:

- *Personal presence*: how you view yourself and how others view you
- *Team presence*: how you get things done through and with the team you're accountable for on a day-to-day basis
- *Organizational presence*: how you work outside of your day-to-day team to get bigger things done than you can do on your own

What each of those subsets of leadership presence has in common is that to exercise them you actually have to be present. By *present*, I don't just mean physically present but also mentally, relationally, and even spiritually present. Even if you're not in a formal leadership role in your organization, chances are you serve in other formal or informal leadership roles all the time—at home and in your community. How can you show up with presence when you're so overworked and overwhelmed that you're struggling with even being fully present? The answer is, you can't.

Here's some good news, though. It doesn't have to be that way. One of my favorite definitions of *leadership* is that it's a two part job—the first is to define reality; the second is to offer hope. I think that's also a good definition for my primary profession of leadership coaching and education, as well as for being a good parent, a good friend, a good partner, and the many other roles that most of us end up playing in life.

So we've just spent most of this chapter defining the reality of the overworked and overwhelmed life that so many of us live. What's the alternative that offers hope? That's what the rest of this book is about. As the subtitle of the book suggests, I think the answer lies in developing some level of mindfulness as an alternative to struggling to keep up with the overworked and overwhelmed state in which it's all too easy to find ourselves these days. It's not as hard or as challenging or even as intimidating as it might seem.

Let's get started by unpacking what mindfulness is and isn't in the next chapter.

Coach's Corner

- What's making you feel overworked and overwhelmed?
- What's the payoff for you from overcommitting to many of the things that make you feel overworked and overwhelmed?
- What are the big wedges in your pie chart of how you spend the 168 hours you get each week? What would you like to change about that?
- What are the biggest drivers of distraction that keep you from being fully present?

