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Do your to-do lists stretch on and on — and on? Do you dread checking email on Friday afternoons, worried about seeing messages piling up when you're just trying to get out the door? Or maybe you've noticed that anxiety is preventing you from concentrating on whatever you're currently doing. You might feel anxious that you're *not* working during times that are incompatible with working, like when you're buckling your child into their car seat or you're stuck in traffic. You may

even feel anxious about the project you're not working on when you're busy plugging away on something else.

If you have moments of feeling overwhelmed by your workload, here are some suggestions to try. Not all of these will be right for everyone, so pick what you think will help you. But always, always start with taking slow breaths (it's better to focus on slow rather than deep breathing). Slow breathing helps you stop panicking and take a more long-term focus as it activates the brain's prepare-and-plan mindset. If you focus on breathing *out* like you're blowing up a balloon slowly, your breath *in* with naturally regulate itself.

Practice your acceptance skills with healthy self-talk

The best self-talk helps you feel calmer and in control. It combines self-compassion and appropriate responsibility-taking (not too much, not too little). Feeling excessively responsible is associated with a vulnerability to worry. Experiment with different types of self-talk and see what works best for you. As a kickoff, you might try:

- "Even though I have many things to do, I can only focus on the one thing I'm doing right now. I'll feel better if I do that."
- "I would prefer to be able to get more done in a day, but I'm going to accept what I'm realistically able to do." (This phrase utilizes a common cognitive-behavioral therapy technique where it's recommended people swap out their "shoulds" for "prefer" or "could" in order to relieve anxiety and feel more empowered).
- I like the mantra "What's the best action to take right now?" to remind me that ruminating about the past or worrying about the future interferes with optimal focusing and prioritizing.
- "I enjoy my work so I like to be busy. It's natural that I'm going to feel overwhelmed sometimes. I can handle those emotions and make adjustments as needed."

Track your time to give yourself an accurate baseline

There's some evidence from research comparing time tracking data to self-reports that people who say they work very long hours are generally overestimating. Large-scale research indicates that the proportion of people working over 60 hours per week is quite small, at around 6%. If you're saying to yourself "I work 70 hours a week" your brain will react as if that were true, even if it's an exaggeration.

How does this thinking error arise? Sometimes our brains jump to conclusions based on our emotions. When you feel anxious about work, your brain will overestimate how much you're working, which in turn makes you feel more anxious and sets up a self-perpetuating cycle. When your perception of your workload is dramatically overblown, the situation feels hopeless, which will likely leave you feeling depressed as well as anxious and you'll become avoidant. You won't take the practical steps you could to address your situation. If you're making this estimation error, don't take it too personally. This is a pervasive general pattern and not a personal flaw.

Try tracking your time for a single week. There are online tools for this, but you can also use a spreadsheet or just a notebook. Track your time without actively attempting to change your behavior. Your behavior will naturally shift in positive directions due to monitoring, so there's no need to force it, at least initially. (Laura Vanderkam gives great tips of how to go about doing this and how to categorize your data in her book, *168 Hours*.)

Limit brief work-related activities during non-work time, like checking your phone or firing off a quick email. Objectively these activities may only take a few minutes, but this pattern can feel like it consumes more time than it actually does, so curb these behaviors.

The flip side is that small bursts of meaningful *non*-work activities can help your life feel more balanced. For example, if I crouch down and look my two-year old in the eye when we're having a moment together, those seconds give me a sense I'm doing more quality parenting, even though it's a few minutes here and there. Five minutes of uninterrupted conversation feels more meaningful than 10 minutes of scattered attention.

Check your assumptions about other people's expectations

We often self-generate rules we expect ourselves to follow. For example, "I need to reply to Sandra more quickly than she generally replies to me." Or, "I need to reply to any email within the day." Consider that when people take a while to respond, it sends the signal that they're busy and prioritizing, and may lead to other people respecting their time to a greater extent.

One of my pet peeves is receiving "to do" emails on Friday afternoons — my fear is that if I don't complete whatever is needed over the weekend, the early part of the following week will fill up and the person who emailed me will be left waiting for me to finish whatever it is I need to do. However, it's worth considering that whoever contacted you as they were running out the door from work might not *want* a response during the weekend. Replying immediately to after-hours emails contributes to the always-on cycle for everyone.

- Practice not responding to messages outside of business hours. Most people will get the message, and may appreciate you helping them with their own boundaries. When you limit your replies to business hours you're more likely to consider where replying fits into your overall priorities than if your pattern is to jump to attention at any hour of the day upon receiving emails.
- Clarify expectations with others. Instead of assuming that your boss needs something done immediately, why not ask her when she needs it by?
- Let people know when you'll get back to them. If something will realistically take you two weeks to get to, just say so.

Examine your assumptions about what success requires

On a similar theme, you might also be self-generating faulty thoughts about what it takes to be successful in your field. Perfectionistic assumptions like, "To succeed I need to work harder than everyone else" become especially problematic when you're rising through the ranks in a competitive

industry and you're in a group of other overachievers. Here's the tricky part about identifying your problem thoughts: our assumptions and self-generated rules are often implicit. When you're feeling miserable or blocked, that's a great time to hunt down any hidden assumptions that are contributing to that.

Look out for assumptions that cause unnecessary stress, especially if these also contribute to procrastination and paralysis. For example, to get unstuck with writing I sometimes need to remind myself that whatever I'm working on only needs to be a useful resource and doesn't need to include everything there is to say about a topic (which would be impossible and unwieldy).

Write out your problem assumptions and a more realistic alternative. Your realistic alternative thought could be something like "Given that my workgroup is comprised of high achievers, there is a good chance that most of us in this group will be successful. Therefore I don't need to perform at the very top of the group in order to achieve success." Constructing more realistic alternative assumptions is part science and part art. Experiment with different types of thinking to see what feels most true and most helpful to you personally.

Start taking time off now instead of waiting for the "right" time

When you take an evening or weekend day off and the sky doesn't fall in, you learn experientially that you can be less anxious about your workload. If you want to feel more relaxed about work, act more relaxed about it.

You can operationalize this however you want. Ask yourself "If I were more relaxed about my workload, how would I act?" and identify 3-5 specific ways.

A classic catch-22 in psychology is that people wait for their emotions to change before changing their behavior. However, changing your behavior is probably the best and fastest way to change your emotions (and thoughts). When you start tuning into it, you will probably notice the pattern cropping up again and again. For example, try flipping "When I'm less busy, I'll create some better systems" into "When I create better systems, I'll feel less busy." This approach will help you combat the pervasive self-sabotaging pattern of being too busy chasing cows to build a fence.

Alice Boyes, PhD is a former clinical psychologist turned writer and is author of *The Healthy Mind Toolkit* and *The Anxiety Toolkit*.