



Wait! Stop! It's All Too Much!

By Martha Beck



Photo: Brett Ryder

Appointments! Dishes! E-mails! Hang on, my cell phone's ringing! S.O.S.! No wonder we stumble around all day, dazed and confused. Martha Beck shows you how to unclutter, unclog, and keep your head above water.

Sonya opens her calendar to schedule a meeting. The little book bristles with appointments. Distracted, she begins to fret about the thousand things she should do right away, then closes the calendar—without adding the new meeting.

Paula stands in the kitchen, but she has no idea why. The countertop is stacked with mail, the refrigerator papered with reminder notes. As Paula closes her eyes and tries to focus, her landline and cell phones ring almost simultaneously. Instead of answering, she puts her hands over her ears and lets out a strangled yell.

Two hours ago, I went online to verify a fact for this article. This put me in range of 150 e-mails, many news stories, and a video clip labeled "Very Excited Pug," which I felt morally compelled to share with everyone I've ever met. (Google it. Seriously.) Now I can't even remember the fact I was checking.

Sonya, Paula, and I aren't crazy or brain damaged; were just overwhelmed. You probably are, too. "Overwhelm" is increasingly common as demands on human attention increase exponentially. The human brain just wasn't designed to handle the environment we inhabit.

For the vast majority of world history, human life—both culture and biology—was shaped by scarcity. Food, clothing, shelter, tools, and pretty much everything else had to be farmed or fabricated, at a very high cost in time and energy. Knowledge was power, and it was hard to come by; for centuries, books had to be copied by hand and were rare and precious. Even people were scarce: Friends and relatives died young (as late as 1900, life expectancy in the United States was approximately 49 years).

This kind of scarcity still rules the world's poorest regions. But in the developed world, hundreds of millions of us now face the bizarre problem of surfeit. Yet our brains, instincts, and socialized behavior are still geared to an environment of lack. The result? Overwhelm—on an unprecedented scale.

"I hate my house," Paula tells me. "It's so overstuffed, I feel like I'm suffocating." Sonya feels the same way about her schedule. "I sprint from one obligation to another," she says. "I feel as if I'm drowning. I can't even connect with the people I love."

Both Paula and Sonya are bright, strong women, more than capable of straightforward tasks like clearing out a room or schedule. Yet when Paula walks into her guest bedroom and Sonya tries to reorganize her time, they sink into a kind of muddled netherworld, like Dorothy in the poppy fields of Oz. Their intentions grow fuzzy. They forget what they're doing. Is this dementia? Alzheimer's? Sheer cursed laziness? None of the above. It's a symptom of overwhelm called attentional blindness. You've almost certainly experienced this, too. Understanding it can help you manage it.

The Attention Funnel

For animals to survive in nature—for predators to spot prey, or prey to avoid predators—they must be able to focus intently on well-camouflaged targets, screening out extraneous information. Because of this, animal brains automatically develop "search images," brain templates that help them zoom in on crucial survival information and ignore everything else.

You use search images, too. When you and a friend become separated in the mall, you scan the crowd, not

scrutinizing every face but quickly filtering out everyone who's too tall, too short, wearing the wrong color of clothing. You're creating an "attention bottleneck," a narrow aperture that allows only certain information into conscious awareness, and going attentionally blind to anything that doesn't make it through the bottleneck.

To test your attentional targeting abilities, try simultaneously talking on the phone, watching TV, and conversing with someone standing next to you. You may be able to shuttle between these three stimuli, but as soon as you hear something particularly attention grabbing—"What? He locked his wife in a freezer?"—you'll lose the thread of the other two information streams.

When your brain assigns equal importance to several things at once, your attention bottleneck jams. You go attentionally blind to *everything*. This is the fuzzy, paralyzed feeling Sonya and Paula experience when they try to clear their space or time. It can be merely annoying, or catastrophic—for example, a driver engrossed in a cell phone conversation may go mind-blind to an obstacle right in front of his eyes.

It's unnerving, then, that humans have created an environment unnaturally jammed with attention-grabbing information. Take advertising (please). Our brains evolved to pay close attention to unusually bright colors, food, sex, babies, physical danger, and other information salient to survival. So marketers bombard us with such images, making them ever brighter, louder, gorier, geared to outcompete all other attention demands. Now consider the flood of information from new communication technology, being used by more humans than ever before. The result is rampant attentional blindness. It'll overwhelm pretty much all of us until we learn to outmaneuver our instincts.

Was Blind But Now I See

Sonya and Paula react to overwhelm by telling themselves to *Focus, dammit!* You may do the same. This is like cramming sand into a clogged drainpipe; the problem is that your brain is already trying too hard to focus on too much. Nature has programmed certain settings into the attention function of your brain, but the time has come to reprogram it yourself.

The best way to learn this process is away from the demands of your life—someplace that isn't home or work. Try a shopping center, a carnival, Times Square, or any other environment filled with competing attention demands.

STEP ONE: Unclog your overwhelmed brain.

To begin, free your attention bottleneck by closing your eyes and taking deep, slow breaths. Concentrate only on the feeling, sound, taste, and smell of the air going into and out of your lungs.

STEP TWO: Choose a search image.

Pick an arbitrary category of items as your search image—for example, "things that are blue." Repeat the word *blue* as you open your eyes. Notice that blue things appear, and that other items become blurred. This is normal.

STEP THREE: Switch images.

Close your eyes again, breathing in and out until you feel relaxed, and choose a new category, such as "round things" (or tall women, or green cars, or whatever).

STEP FOUR: Relax to focus.

You may find that you can't visualize your selected search images, that you're distracted by noises, colors, activity. This happens because you're not used to setting your own attention focus. Instead of concentrating harder, think softer. Relax your senses; mentally repeat your search phrase ("blue," "round things," "tall women," "green car"). Gradually, you'll find that your eyes locate the image on their own.

STEP FIVE: Bring focus to a familiar activity.

Once you can target your attention while holding still, practice the same exercise during an ordinary activity like driving or jogging. As you cruise along, repeat the search-image phrase, "anything that moves." This will make you more alert to things that will keep you safe.

STEP SIX: Tackle the hard stuff.

Finally, take your attention-directing skills into a situation that usually overwhelms you. For Paula, it's her cluttered house; for Sonya, her schedule. Instead of diving in, they need to set their attention focus prior to

entering the danger zone. Think of this as a mission statement—a carefully defined surgical strike, rather than a vague plan to do better. For Paula, a useful goal might be "I'll go into the home office, locate three books I haven't touched for years, and donate them to the library." Sonya might attack her planner with the mission "I'll cancel one commitment that isn't totally necessary."

It's crucial to keep repeating your mission statement throughout the attempt. Don't let your attention bottleneck widen to include any other factors. That's why each exercise should be small—to give you minimal time for becoming distracted. By making a series of attacks on things like clutter or obligations, weeding out everything you don't absolutely need, and using only one search image per attack, you'll begin to feel a new sense of control over your life.

Directing All Your Attention

Handling overwhelm this way is not for the fainthearted. It means resisting deep instinctive and cultural tendencies. For Paula to clear her office, she must reject the idea that every book is an irreplaceable treasure. For Sonya to feel less swamped by obligations, she must learn to say no, even when it strains a relationship. The reality of the 21st century is that you simply can't fit in every social obligation you think you "absolutely have to." We evolved to live in relatively small groups of, say, 50 individuals; you probably have three times that many contacts, through e-mail alone, every single day. Guarding against surfeit is as essential for us as guarding against scarcity was for our ancestors.

You can use attention-focused missions to trim all sorts of once rare, now overabundant items from your life. Use the strategy in restaurants, to eat only until you're satisfied, rather than stuffing in extra calories, as any primitive human would rightly do. Use it to toss clothing you haven't worn for years, or to pass a sale rack without buying some shiny, attention-grabbing, utterly unnecessary object. Use it to prevent overwhelm in any of the countless situations that make you go mind-blind. I'll use it right now, to verify that fact I was checking when interrupted by the Very Excited Pug. As soon as I remember what it was.

The Focus Test

For a dramatic demonstration of attentional blindness, [watch the video on this website](#).

You'll see a brief clip of students playing basketball. First, watch the film and (this is crucial) count the number of times the white-shirt team passes the basketball. Don't come back to read the next page until you've finished counting.

Spoiler alert: If you haven't finished the video, I'm now going to ruin the surprise.

Several seconds into the film, a person in a gorilla suit walks into the frame, thumps his chest, and saunters off. The vast majority of people who are busy counting the white-shirt passes simply don't see the gorilla. Don't believe me? Try it on a friend.

Martha Beck is the author of The Four-Day Win (Rodale).

Related Resources

[More advice from Martha Beck](#)

From *O, The Oprah Magazine*

Subscribe & Save up to 78%

Discover more ways YOU can live your best life in every issue. *O, The Oprah Magazine*

O P R A H . C O M