

# Working While Overwhelmed

Carrie Bowers, CAS



**T**he practice of law requires close attention to detail, focus and concentration on a wide range of tasks and people, time management, deadlines, task follow-through, and basic organizational management. Over the course of the pandemic, many legal professionals have experienced heightened levels of stress that have negatively impacted memory, attention span, and time management. When we are overwhelmed by competing priorities, executive dysfunction can occur in the pre-frontal cortex of the brain such as difficulty within auditory processing, sustained focus, short-term memory formation, time awareness, uneven productivity, and impulsivity. Heightened levels of stress can also exacerbate several behavioral health issues, including neurodiverse issues, cognitive impairment, anxiety, depression, substance use, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).<sup>1</sup> Whether we have a diagnosis or are experiencing symptomology of a behavioral health issue because we are overwhelmed, during times of stress we might have difficulty concentrating and distractibility that makes it hard to manage details, juggle schedules, pre-plan for projects or events, and can pose a challenge while interacting with others, socially and professionally.

## Tips for Working While Overwhelmed:

There are strategies that are helpful to anyone who is feeling overwhelmed or having a hard time managing the stress of daily life when it may be difficult to “think your way out” of the brain fog. Below are free and simple tips:

- **Chunk your tasks.** Break down any task into its sub-components and handle them one at a time. This gives you the motivating satisfaction of crossing things off a list with greater frequency.
- **Use a timer.** Sometimes referred to as the Pomodoro<sup>2</sup> method, this technique uses a timer set to a reasonable amount of time, say 20-25 minutes, to focus on a task followed by a 5-10 minute break. The idea is to galvanize motivation and focus by using an impending deadline, while ensuring that brain-refreshing breaks are in place. It can also help break hyper-focus mode and increase time awareness.
- **Delegate.** Is there something you can hand off to someone else? Maybe a partner or co-worker can help cross a household task or small work item off your list. You don’t need to do everything! And everything is not equally important.
- **Fight procrastination with procrastination.** Don’t want to tackle that project or sink full of dishes? Make a call or finish some emails instead. Engagement with another human can often spur more energy. Or, try the inverse if the correspondence isn’t urgent and enter your billable hours instead. Use the time spent procrastinating one task to complete another and you will feel productive regardless.
- **Give yourself a break!** Take that nap, watch that show, go for a walk, or even just stare out the window for a while. If you feel guilty, or think you need to do a few more things before you “deserve” to rest – please give yourself some grace. Allowing your brain to rest is essential for optimal cognitive functioning. And you probably do deserve it! Today’s challenges are not always easy to navigate, and everyone is doing the best they can, including you!



- **Movement.** Engaging in movement or exercise regularly helps the brain shift focus. Get up and walk around more often when you have “desk jockey” days in front of the computer. Build a routine that tunes into what type of movement is most effective for your body at a particular time of day. For some people, more strenuous exercise is helpful in the morning, while for others it is helpful in the evening because it facilitates restful sleep. Likewise, for some of us stretching, yoga and breath work are beneficial first thing in the morning, while for others these activities help them “wind down” in the evening.
- **Lighten up.** Humor and gratitude are two antidotes to feeling overwhelmed. Engaging in activities that activate your sense of humor, whether it is in the course of a conversation or reading/watching something funny, redirects your brain chemistry in ways that activate your ability to problem solve more effectively and “keep things in perspective.” Identifying something that you are appreciative of or grateful for has the same effect.



There are some small adjustments you can make to help yourself meet your goals. Not all techniques are helpful for everyone. Finding what works for you may involve a process of wins and losses, or trial-and-error, but patience is sometimes hard to practice when we feel anxious and overwhelmed. Try not to get discouraged if something you try doesn't lead to the outcome you wanted. The practice of law can bring out the competitive, and perfectionistic sides to our personality. This can lead us to believe that if a certain “hack” works for someone else that it should work for us as well. But we are all different, and knowing the time management or organizational techniques that don't work for us is valuable in discovering what does work. If you could use some support determining what could help you reduce stress and overwhelm, or other confidential and free support, consider reaching out to COLAP for a wellbeing consultation and/or tailored referrals.

Carrie Bowers is the Program Coordinator of the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). COLAP is the free, confidential, and independent well-being program for the legal community of Colorado. For more information, go to [www.coloradolap.org](http://www.coloradolap.org). For a confidential consultation, discussion about your stressors, or to obtain helpful resources, contact COLAP at 303-986-3345 or [info@coloradolap.org](mailto:info@coloradolap.org).

#### Notes

1. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/adhd-what-you-need-to-know#pub1>

2. <https://science.nichd.nih.gov/confluence/display/newsletter/2020/05/07/The+Pomodoro+Technique%3A+An+Effective+Time+Management+Tool>

