

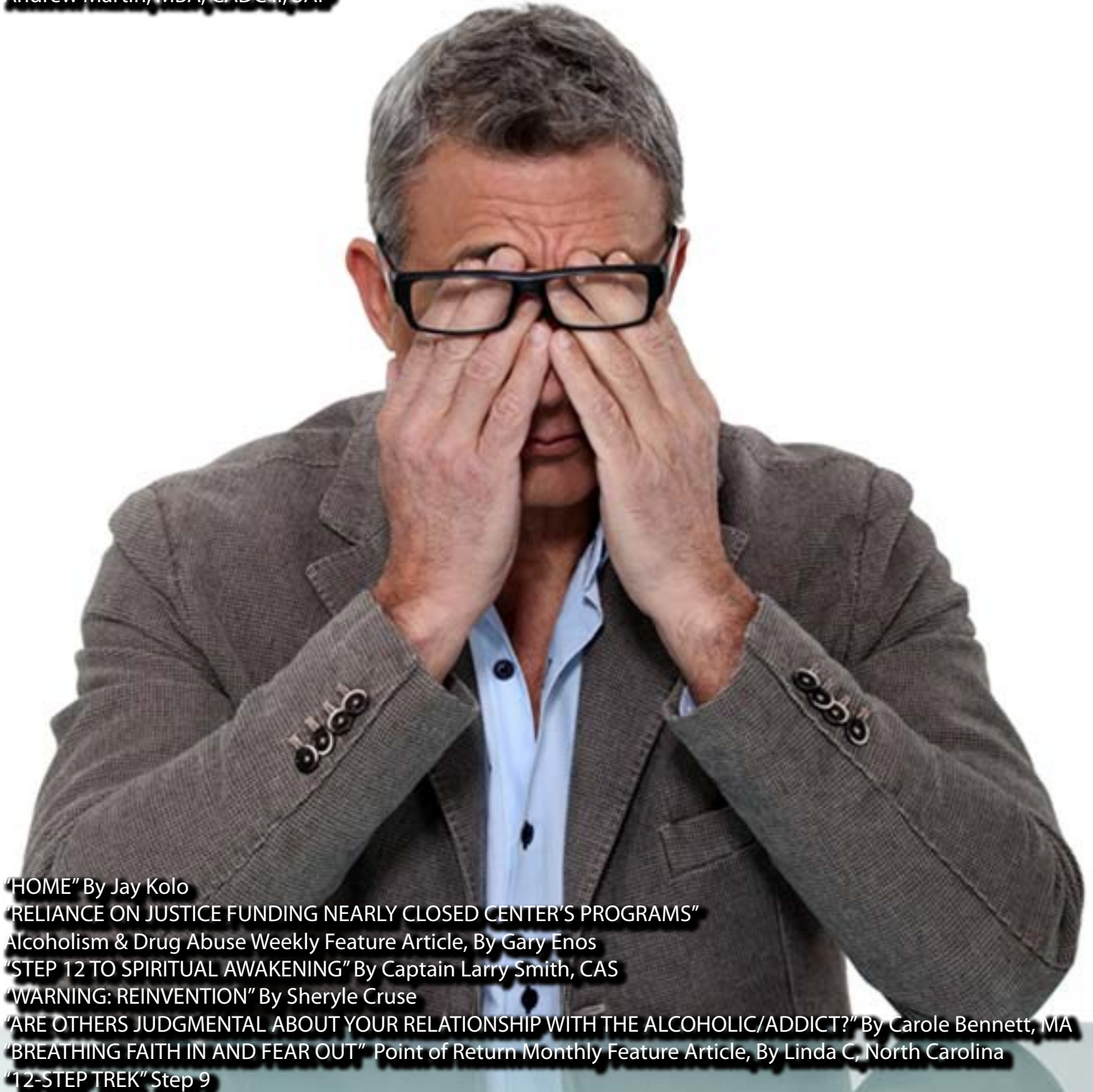
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PRIORITIZING THE OVERWHELM



By Andrew Matthews

Have you ever experienced a time in your life when it seemed as if there were far too many things to deal with than were possible? Task on top of task were piling up and no matter what you did, you could not get on top of the pile? Excessive frustration, anger, remorse, depression, or other emotions seemed out of control and you felt things would not get better any time soon? You are not alone: this type of overpowering life circumstance happens to many people, and there are healthy methods of coping.

When you become chronically overwhelmed your body, mind and spirit are negatively affected. Your body begins to produce excess cortisol, the stress hormone which stimulates the fight, flight, freeze response, and with continued excess cortisol production your body's tissues are damaged. Adrenal fatigue produces insomnia, unclear thinking, sleepiness, exhaustion, and irritability. Depression and mood swings follow, as you feel inadequate and build a desire to give up the unending chase.



The sinister thing about overwhelm is that it is usually not recognized until the overwhelm is so significant that life becomes unmanageable. As a consequence, one of the best tools for dealing with chronic overwhelm is to become aware before the overwhelm is a monumental problem. This approach works only if you are not already in overwhelm mode.

Consider the following questions:

Are you placing expectations on yourself that are too high?	By creating high expectations for yourself, you force yourself to try to perform at a level that may not be realistic given other life circumstances.
Are you saying yes too many times?	Every time you say yes to another task, your resources are taxed. Taking on too many things at once will stretch your resources too thin.
Are you telling yourself you are not good enough?	Self-criticism can get the best of you when you have nothing to say but negative reinforcement. If you have too many things to do and not enough time to do them, it is obvious that everything will not get done.
Can you stop before things are perfect?	Compulsive behavior can keep you engaged in a task far too long, and before you know it you are behind in everything else that needs to get done. Perhaps not everything needs to be perfect.
Do you need to be in control of everything?	You may be burdening yourself with more things to do because you are not willing to allow people around you to help. Sometimes people do things differently, and they still get the job done.

These self-awareness questions may be useful in preempting a case of overwhelm, but what do you do if you are already in a state of chronic overwhelm?

There are many techniques to manage stress and overwhelm. The first place to start is with perception and understanding. If you are in overwhelm mode, recognize it and accept it. Without acceptance, there is no reason to go any further; and with acceptance, you can begin to find a way out. Furthermore, accept that finding your way out of chronic overwhelm will take some time; there are no immediate fixes so you will want to give yourself a break and allow yourself to slowly work out of overwhelm mode.

Now that you have developed an acceptance for where you are at, it is time to create a plan of action that is different from what you have been doing. Start by trying to step out of the minutia of all the things that need to be done. Try to see things in a different light, a bigger picture, from a broader perspective. Use your logical brain and allow your emotional center to take a second seat for a while. Once you are feeling more grounded

and calm, try to make a list of the tasks that you feel need to be addressed. You may need to take periodic breaks if your anxiety and stress returns. When you are calm, complete the list.

Is it now time to prioritize the list. You will be able to prioritize the list using a tool called the prioritization tree. The prioritization tree simplifies the process of prioritization by making just one simple decision between two tasks on the list at any given time – no matter how large the list. The entire list will be prioritized using this method, so the overwhelm of keeping all the various tasks in your head all at once will be gone. This clarifying tool is incredibly powerful and empowering.

To start, take your list and write the letters of the alphabet to the left of each item on the list, or transcribe your list onto the Prioritization Tree Worksheet. Each of your tasks will be called factors. Now each factor will now have a letter of the alphabet written next to it, starting with the letter A. If you have more than 26 factors, just start doubling up the letters (e.g. AA, BB, etc).

Factors	Priority
A Going to my morning meeting	
B Getting my mail forwarded	
C Paying my bills	
D Searching for a job	

Prioritization can go a long way in helping to reduce your overwhelm, but there are many more tools that can help further. It is likely that you also like to assume control of most of the tasks in your life as this is a very common personality trait of those who find themselves overwhelmed often. There is a tool that can be integrated into your life that will help you assume control over the tasks that you enjoy, and allow you to delegate the tasks that you do not.

When you enjoy doing something, the task is done more quickly and with better results than if you do not enjoy it. Additionally, if you enjoy the task, you are likely to not procrastinate. It just makes sense to focus your energy on the things you enjoy, and delegate the other tasks. It is understandable that everything you do not enjoy cannot be delegated, so in these instances, take care of the un-enjoyable tasks first thing in the day so you can look forward to doing the things you enjoy afterward. This is a simple and effective tool.



Another personality trait of people with chronic overwhelm is difficult asking for help. You were just asked to delegate the tasks that you find un-enjoyable and you are likely skeptical because you do not know who you can delegate those tasks to. This is a symptom of not asking for help from those around you that are happy to help. Now is the time to change that behavior.

Understand that people around you love to help out if they can, just as you love to help out when you can. The likely truth of the matter is that your ego is getting in the way of your asking for help. Another truth is that asking for help when there is not a crisis is far better than asking for help at the last minute in a crisis situation. You can ask for help and you will find, that most of the time, you will receive the help. Remember that other people may take care of the task differently than

you would, so allow them to take care of it their own way. As long as the task is finished ethically, morally and correctly, does it really matter how it got done?



Chronic overwhelm creates a stressful and restless existence. At some point, you must make the time to integrate a regular break in the tension of the frenetic pace of the day. You can schedule into your routine a 15 or 30 minute respite to do something that provides a therapeutically soothing effect on your attitude. Perhaps a brief meditation, reading a book for fun, taking a walk with your dog, playing with your cat, working on an art project, playing music, or something else that is just for you. This type of escape is tremendously important for creating clarity and self-awareness in your life.

You might be thinking that it is nearly impossible to make 15 or 30 minutes of time each day that is just for you. You might be thinking that you are far too busy and pulled in far too many directions throughout the day to contemplate having personal time to yourself. If this sounds familiar to you, then you also need to integrate a wonderfully empowering tool called boundary setting.

Boundary setting will allow you to say "no" when you cannot take on another task. Do not forget that you only have 24 hours in each day, and you need to make them count. That means being productive and taking care of the business of life, and it also means taking care of yourself. If you are chronically overwhelmed, you likely do not have a good life balance. However, you can start creating a good life balance now. All you need to do is think for a few minutes before taking on a new task, and evaluate whether you truly have the time to invest without creating an off-balance lifestyle. If you need to say "no", then do so. This will be uncomfortable at first, but soon you will realize that it is perfectly fine

to say "no" as long as you have thought it through.



This may be something very new to you. If you have significant trouble saying "no" then another tool may help you become self-aware. Take ten minutes at the end of each day and conduct a check-in on yourself. Consider how you have behaved throughout the day, and how you feel throughout the day. Make some notes in a journal and briefly consider how you are conducting your life on a daily basis. If you are aware of your actions, you are far more likely to appreciate your strengths and to become motivated to change your deficiencies.

One more tool that you may want to integrate into the end of your day is that of gratitude. Each day you are giving the gift of life, adventure, spirit, connection, and experience. You may find it makes a considerable difference in your life if you take a moment, before drifting off to sleep, to appreciate the gifts of the day. Even on the worst of days, there are gifts of life. Intentional focus on those gifts will help to fill your heart with appreciation.



Chronic overwhelm can be a very difficult challenge to overcome. You can do it. Integrate some of these tools into your daily routine and you will find relief. You can do it. **SS**



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Andrew Martin began his entrepreneurial approach to business in 1982 at the age of fifteen. Throughout his career, Andrew has fulfilled his duties as a senior executive in viable business ventures in various industries including; health care, sound reinforcement and lighting, electrical safety equipment, commercial catering, specialty metal

shapes manufacturing, and the entertainment overhead suspension industry.

Andrew's current business efforts are encompassed by Serene Recovery Network, a group of branded organizations with a common vision of helping people in early recovery to help themselves to a long-term rewarding quality of life without addiction. The individual businesses include Serene Center, a 36 bed transitional sober living facility in Long Beach, CA which also conducts outpatient counseling services, drug testing and monitoring, and outpatient detoxification. Serene Connections, a publishing and professional educational conference production company catering to the field of addiction treatment. Serene Directory, an online directory of professionals and organizations affiliated with behavioral and mental health. Serene Foundation, a micro loan lender providing funding for the continuum of addiction care.

Andrew has authored many articles related to addiction treatment, health care agency productivity, industry specialties, as well as business approach and leadership and has been published in Serene Scene, Behavioral Health, Freedom Newspaper, Sound & Video Contractor, Western Wall and Ceiling Contractors Association Bulletin, Connections Magazine (Australia), dB Magazine, EQ, Lighting & Sound International (Canada), Sound & Communications, Live Sound International (UK), Recording-Engineering-Production. Additionally, many patents and trademarks have been awarded to Andrew Martin for various business related products, brand names, and service marks.

Andrew is also very active in the California Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors (CAADAC) Board of Directors and Sober Living Network. Andrew also keynotes for many organizations.