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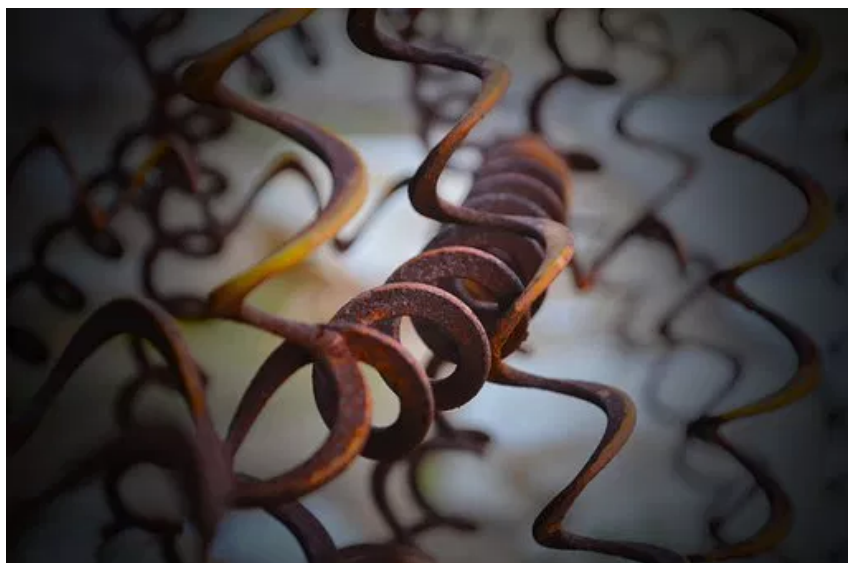
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What Happens to Our Bodies When We Get Overwhelmed

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By [Dr. Aimie Apigian](#) | May 30th, 2018



Are you feeling the health effects of being overwhelmed? Whether or not you notice the

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effects of it on your body, there are changes that are happening!

Some of the short-term health effects can be anxiety and panic attacks. However, over a course of time, the effects can result in the form of depression, fatigue, and a long list of chronic diseases.

Feeling overwhelmed lately? Have you been seeing the long-term effects of feeling overwhelmed and don't realize you've been overwhelmed?

Overwhelm is a whole brain and body response! Feeling anxious, and especially feeling anxious to a point of overwhelm, is going to affect your health.

In this blog we're going to go over what the response is, why it happens, and what you can do to stop it, prevent it, and reverse some of the long-term effects.

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Are You Constantly Feeling Overwhelmed?



The Bodies Reaction to Overwhelm

While you may think it's just emotional stress, your body and health will have a reaction to feeling overwhelmed.



Your response to stress is biological. Overwhelm is like stress on steroids – it's a breaking point! Because of this, overwhelm triggers the survival system, which is a whole body response, to a greater degree than just stress.

Your body has a **programmed survival response**, and when you reach the point of overwhelm, you'll see this pattern show up again and again in your emotions, as well as in your health. It'll become very familiar to you, even if you don't know what's underneath.

Being aware of your body can help you see those patterns and understand the degree of stress your body is under. You can then see the importance of changing these patterns to help you maintain a healthy physical and emotional life.

No matter what your patterns have been, they can be changed with time and intention. You can see improvements in your energy levels, pain, depression, or anxiety by changing your patterned responses to stress and overwhelm.

2 Kinds of Overwhelm

There are 2 kinds of overwhelm:

There is "Too much Too Fast" and "Too Little For Too Long."

Let's explore these types of overwhelm more.

Too Much Too Fast-

A situation hits you and you immediately become overwhelmed by the intensity of it. It's hit you too fast! Like a car you never saw coming that has slammed into you. This is a combination of too



much of an impact happening too fast for your system to process. Your system goes into overwhelm and shock.

Two physical feelings that are commonly described with these types of situations are feeling like you got a knife to the heart, or an immediate knot in your stomach that's accompanied with nausea.

Too Little For Too Long-

Too little for too long happens when the body goes into overwhelm and shock from having to hang on for too long. It's not that it's too much, but that it's been so hard for so long that your body gives up.

We may have a lot to deal with and we may not have very many resources and tools to use. You hold on for as long as you can, but if one more thing gets added, you buckle. Your system then goes into overwhelm and shock.

Both types of overwhelm elicit the same response from our brains and bodies: the survival response!

The Bodies Response to Overwhelm

You may not be aware of this response and the health effects of feeling overwhelmed, but every cell in your body is going to respond to the threat. Yes, overwhelm is seen by the brain as a threat to one's ability to survive!

Every cell in your body responds to the call from the brain to go into survival mode, and feeling overwhelmed triggers this call to go into survival mode!



What I am frequently seeing more and more of are people who chronically feel overwhelmed with life. They're frequently getting hit with too much too fast or too little for too long, and their bodies are chronically in survival mode.

A person is often unaware of the underlying overwhelm, because they've lived with it for so long. In turn, they aren't aware of the slow changes to their health that are happening, until they're deep into anxiety, depression, fatigue, chronic pain, or other chronic medical conditions.

A person is frequently feeling overwhelmed with life, their survival response gets ingrained quite deeply.

Their survival response to overwhelm actually comes as an automatic response, a default pattern, and with more time, a well-paved highway that they may spend more and more time on.

How Did My Patterned Response to Feeling Overwhelmed Get Formed?

Both types of overwhelm, too much too fast, or too little for too long, have their roots in early life. For those with attachment trauma, their response to overwhelm is formed very early. Before we even have the words to explain how we feel. Our brains and bodies are forming their programmed response to overwhelm.

You see, attachment trauma is feeling overwhelmed. Attachment trauma is from experiencing either too



much too fast or too little for too long as a very young child. Younger than what you even have memory of, though you'll have memories if it continued throughout your childhood.

The result of early life stress and attachment trauma is that later in life, your response to this as a young infant becomes your patterned response even into adulthood.

Threshold for Stress and Overwhelm

ur early life experiences will also determine how much your system can handle before it becomes stressed out or overwhelmed.

ou had attachment trauma, your nervous system already has a lower capacity for resilience and flexibility, and will therefore, have lower thresholds for something become too much, too fast, too little, or too long.

Starting from birth, and some argue even before birth, our bodies and brains are naturally putting feelers out into the environment to see if it feels safe.

If it doesn't feel safe, our survival system kicks in and starts trying different things in order to figure out the best way to survive. Whatever works out the best will be the pattern it sticks with.

Over time, your body develops its specific pattern to responding to overwhelm based on your specific early relationships, life experiences, and what worked and helped you to survive through these early experiences.



Even if while moving forward with life, no matter what causes you to feel overwhelmed, this same pattern will occur.

Since your whole body is going to respond to this overwhelm, not only will it be just your emotions going crazy in the same way, but also your physical health. Both will have patterns that you can start to track, understand, and predict.

is on automatic; you'll be responding in ways that you aren't even aware of, or able to catch in the foreground.

To change these patterns, the first step is always awareness of our specific body's patterned responses.

Programmed Patterns

Programmed patterns to overwhelm can include any or all of the following:

For some people, increased attempts to regain control through increased control of themselves, situations, or other people.

For some, it may be to isolate and hide.

We can tend to either feel like a victim to life or become a bully and overpower others to feel in control.

Our patterned responses can tend to go more towards activation and fight or flight, or go more flat towards shut-down, isolate and numb one's self.

Anxiety attacks can become a part of our patterned response to stress and overwhelm over time. An anxiety attack is a very clear symptom of feeling



overwhelmed by something. Anxiety attacks come from our nervous system, because it's been put in a state where it feels like it's too much.

As you can see, there are different ways in which a person's nervous system can respond! These are just a few of the common patterned ways to respond to overwhelm. Even you may be able to relate to some of these in your own life.

For a whole list, you can check out what are known as "The Laundry List" and "The Other Laundry List." These are **two separate lists of traits** of those who grew up in dysfunctional homes.

While you may not have grown up in a dysfunctional home, the same emotional and behavioral patterns are common in those who experienced early life stress and attachment trauma since they're patterned responses to stress and overwhelm.

The more time we spend feeling overwhelmed, the bigger the toll it has on our health and on our body. Because of the cellular biological changes that this state of overwhelm activates, the burden accumulates over time.

If our childhoods were particularly stressful, it sets into play biological changes that play out for our life. If this stress continues on in adulthood, our bodies will give out sooner. Sometimes this is in the form of diseases, and other times it's in the form of general symptoms like fatigue and chronic pain.

Attachment Trauma and Stress Threshold

Why would attachment trauma and early life stress cause overwhelm and set a person up to have a



patterned response to stress and overwhelm?

Let's see how this happens!

Babies are born without the capacity to regulate their own emotions (which is really the nervous system).

They need others to coregulate them for their nervous systems so that they can develop in a balanced and coordinated way.

Another way, what a primary caregiver does is attune and coregulate their nervous system. When they're signaling like they're too activated, an infant will tend to look or push away. An attuned parent will follow their lead and will allow for the disruption and repair the relationship while remaining emotionally grounded and stable themselves.

.. If this coregulation doesn't happen to the extent that they need, the child will have this persistent imbalance in their nervous system so that it's triggered faster and is more reactive.

If this coregulation doesn't happen, the infant gets imbalanced in their own emotional states and nervous system, and will feel a ton of stress and overwhelm. This is what attachment trauma is, and because of that, their bodies develop under a frequent feeling of being overwhelmed.

One example is if a **mother, herself, has an insecure attachment**. One of her responses to her baby pulling or pushing away will likely be to feel rejected. Sometimes a mother with an insecure attachment, due to this subconscious feeling of rejection, won't look away and will be afraid of the disruption.

This will overwhelm the infant's biology as it doesn't obtain the settling down that it so desperately



needs.

Unfortunately, stress doesn't tend to get easier later in life for those with early childhood stress and attachment trauma. One of the things that most sets us up for lower thresholds for stress and overwhelm is by having an insecure attachment or Attachment Disorder.

How Our Brains Are Primed For Stress Response

In this sense, our past does very much set our stress response, determining what'll stress us out and how much we can handle before it'll stress us out.

This is a very useful function of our memory that is used for our survival! Our brain records everything from the past to figure out what things are threats for future reference!

Unfortunately, these judgements and perceptions don't usually change with time, thus we will find ourselves as adults reacting to things as if we were a child.

In this way, our past sets our triggers and threshold for stress. All of our past experiences, but especially our earlier experiences, will set the bar at how a situation can go from being annoying to stressful, as well as how it can go from stressful to overwhelming.

However, there is a lot you can do to change these patterned responses. There are a lot of ways you can work with your nervous system to help form new pathways and achieve better balance, increasing



your threshold for stress and pushing back that point of overwhelm.

Changing Patterned Responses

Because these patterns were developed at such an early age, it'll make it hard for our brain to make changes to those automatic responses in the future. They won't happen automatically, but will require time and intention.

Trying to push or shame ourselves into being able to handle more stress or respond differently to overwhelm is NOT a good idea!

Just like getting a tree to grow in a different direction, it responds to gentle redirection and sunlight.

It's the same with us! We'll make these changes easier if we're reaching for what we want rather than punishing ourselves for how we are.

When you become aware of your patterns: emotional, behavioral, and physical, rather than hate them, you can appreciate them for how they have helped you to survive in the past and are the results of your body trying so hard to survive.

Once you get out of this place of shame, you can then more easily change to how you want to be. Focusing on the light of what you want to grow into rather than the darkness of where you've been will help your body heal and change those patterns.

Gentle redirection happens when you find things to change in your life that will help you feel differently.



You have to start changing the amount of time you spend in overwhelm, but this can be hard when this is all you've known!

This is a topic that you're going to jump into with detail next week. Look for next week's blog on specific and practical ways to change this cycle of going into overwhelm and your patterned emotional, behavioral and physical responses to the overwhelm.

You can get to a place of joyful happiness and freedom no matter what your overwhelm and patterned responses have been up until now!

Summary

Overwhelm is such a debilitating place to be!

It clouds your mind, exhausts you, and worst of all, it can paralyze you. It can also put you into a frenzy where you're always going, always stressed, and the smallest things cause you to panic, because you just can't take one more thing.

It's amazing to me how many years I spent in overwhelm without recognizing it! My body had to fall into a severe fatigue for me to recognize what was going on!

For years I dealt with overwhelm through over exercise and over eating, because both of these things helped to tone down the intensity of my feelings of panic.

A big moment for me in my healing was when I was able to get sad at how I had coped rather than mad at myself for over eating and over exercising. It was then that I was able to make great strides in understanding the overwhelm, because I could look



at it honestly, not through lenses of anger and shame.

I continue to learn about myself and dig deeper into why I have these patterned responses to overwhelm and why certain things overwhelm me.

Because of all the lessons I have learned about myself, I'm much quicker at knowing how close I am to overwhelm and how to pull myself back in a healthy way.

is has been with time, intention, and gentleness throughout the process!

ou can relate at all to feeling overwhelmed or ve started to have physical symptoms of your dy not holding up well anymore, I invite you to plore this further. If anything here seemed to tch your eye, gently dig a little deeper there and start to learn lessons about the wonder of your own unique body, its past, and its patterned responses!

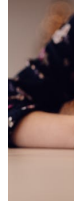
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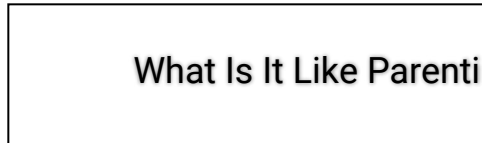
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