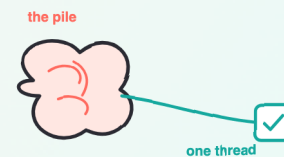


Overwhelm

When too much arrives at once, the system locks up instead of speeding up.
Getting the load out of your head comes before doing any of it.



● What it is

Overwhelm is when the number of things in front of you passes what working memory can hold at once. Not one hard task – the pile. Five half-finished things, three people waiting, a list with no visible bottom. Past that line the system doesn't speed up; it locks: you go blank and can't tell which thread to pull first.

*The tell: you genuinely cannot tell which thread to pull – that's capacity overflow. Standing in the kitchen unable to start any of the four things, near tears over a list that didn't feel hard yesterday. **The overflow is real; it isn't weakness or drama.***

● Why it's harder for ADHD

Holding several things in mind and sequencing them is working memory – and ADHD leaves you less to use at once, fewer pieces in play before they fall off. Past that limit, prioritising goes offline: everything reads as equally urgent, so nothing gets picked. The overflow also fires a stress response, and stress degrades the same prefrontal circuits that prioritise – so the freeze deepens the longer you sit in it. **The load only clears when it moves out of your head onto paper; write the whole pile down before trying to do any of it.**

● The buffer overflows

Working memory is the mental desk you keep the pieces on while you work. ADHD gives you less room; past a few items they fall off, and you lose the thread you were on.

● Prioritising goes offline

Deciding what matters most runs on the brain's planning system – the first thing stress degrades. Under load everything feels equally urgent, and "all of it, now" can't be acted on.

● What helps

● Empty your head onto paper

Get the open loops out of working memory onto a list. Start with whatever's loudest – you needn't recall all of it, the rest surfaces as you write. The pieces stop circling once they're down. Highest-leverage move here.

● Cut the inputs

Lower the load below the freeze line – one task visible, the rest out of sight, tabs closed, phone away. Less coming in, less to hold.

● Pick one – it doesn't have to be right

Prioritising is offline, so don't optimise. Pick the smallest or nearest item just to stop holding all of them, and start. Action brings the planning system back; a perfect choice doesn't.

● Shrink the unit

Do the next five minutes of one thing, not the project. The pile locks you up because you hold all of it at once; you only ever do the next small piece.

● Reset the body first if you've locked up

Frozen, physically tense, or shaking? The stress response is running and reasoning won't land yet. Move, breathe out long, cold water – drop the arousal a notch, then start the list.

► Action Card – Overwhelm

Run it when the pile has locked you up. Keep it where the overwhelm happens.

UNLOAD • THE MOMENT YOU GO BLANK

- 1 Stop adding. Don't try to solve the pile from inside your head.
- 2 If you're frozen or physically tense, reset the body first: move, breathe out longer than in.
- 3 Brain-dump onto one page – start with whatever's loudest; more surfaces as you write. No order.

RE-ENTER • ONE THREAD ONLY

- 4 Cut what's visible to one thing – rest of the list face-down, tabs closed, phone away.
- 5 Circle one item – smallest or nearest. **It doesn't have to be right.** You just need to stop holding all of them.
- 6 Five-minute timer, do only that. The rest stays on the page, not in your head.

Working memory overflowed. Get it onto paper, cut the view to one item, start a five-minute timer.

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