

A woman with dark curly hair and glasses, wearing a black and white striped long-sleeved shirt, is smiling while working on a laptop. She is sitting at a dark desk in a bright office with large windows in the background. The scene is overlaid with a large blue semi-transparent shape on the left side.

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION

Overcoming overwhelm

Overcoming overwhelm



Strategies to share with students

Suggested ideas and practices educators can share with students to support awareness of the topic and development of the skill. Strategies can be adopted/adapted as needed.

- ✓ **Make a global inventory** of your commitments in different courses, volunteer activities and work. Make sure to include personal commitments and resist the temptation to neglect social activities, leisure, and recreation, which are not only essential for physical and mental health, but which also provide the fuel for long-term personal and professional development.
- ✓ **Create a realistic schedule** that allows you to fulfill all the commitments you have identified. If the schedule shows that you cannot fulfill all these commitments, then you should make concrete plans to remove fewer valuable commitments while preserving the time needed to fulfill the most important commitments.
- ✓ Take time at the end of each week and each month to **evaluate and update your schedule** as the commitments in your courses and other activities change.
- ✓ **Seek guidance and help** from your social support network, instructors, and campus organizations to help you overcome less productive ways of thinking and avoidance behavior patterns. Realize that it is perfectly natural for everyone to feel overwhelmed in the face of many different challenges and that it takes a lot of effort, practice, and support to learn how to become better at dealing with stress.



Overcoming overwhelm



Tips for course design and delivery

Ways educators can bring awareness of the topic and incorporate development of the skill into post-secondary course design and delivery.

- Critically evaluate the workload expectations in the assessment components of your course curriculum**, removing components that are less effective at promoting learning and refining components to assist with the achievement of key learning outcomes. Collect feedback from students and consider working with students who have previously taken the course as you critically evaluate your assessment strategies.
- Identify other courses taken by your students** and consult with instructors to stagger the timing of major assignments, presentations, and exams. Encourage students to be proactive about planning ahead to be prepared for the timing of due dates and to inform the instructors of different courses of potential conflicts. When possible, consider incorporating flexibility in submission deadlines for major assignments.
- Consult with your student success centre, student counselling centre, and/or teaching and learning centre** to identify resources available to students to help them with academic success as well as physical and mental health. Consider adding the list of available resources to your course syllabus and course homepage on your learning management system. If these resources are limited at your institution, consider guiding students to community mental health support services.



Overcoming overwhelm



Activities to do with students

Downloadable activities with suggested guidelines that educators can do with students. Activities can be adopted/adapted as needed.

Activity: Project Tasks

Overview

As part of larger projects, include a component that formally and specifically addresses portioning the project. Discuss with students how their work can be broken down into smaller tasks and assign deadlines, inviting students to recognize that smaller parts can minimize feeling overwhelmed.

Review the [Educator Activity Guide](#) before getting started with this activity.

Time

- Under 20 minutes
- 20 minutes to 1 hour
- More than 1 hour
- Over several classes

Format

- Individual
- In pairs
- Small groups
- Large groups
- Whole class

Modality

- In person
- Online synchronous
- Online asynchronous

Resources

- Module notes
- Paper
- Pen/pencil
- Laptop/tablet
- An assignment



Overcoming overwhelm

Instructions

1. Develop an assignment where you deliberately break down one part of it (e.g., the body of an essay, the research slides in a presentation) into smaller submissions with their own deadlines and criteria.
2. Give the assignment to students and provide time for them to read it and reflect on the instructions.
3. Ask students to share their questions in a whole-class setting. This can be done synchronously or asynchronously on a shared document.
4. Have students formulate a plan as to how they will approach these smaller tasks. For each section, they can list:
 - when they plan to start it and when they plan to have it finished by
 - how they will approach the section (e.g., look at past examples, brainstorm ideas, discuss classmates)
 - which resources they may need (e.g., library, meet with professor, find a documentary)
 - small things they can do each day (e.g., set up the headings, find relevant quotes, decide on graph styles)
5. Ask students to finalize their plan and to refer to it as they complete their assignment.
6. When students submit the assignment, have them write a short reflection outlining how closely they were able to follow it, what they would keep/change next time, and the benefits of breaking down larger tasks into smaller ones.

Variation(s)

- Use this scaffolding approach for a group task so students can monitor their progress.
- Encourage students to develop a personal template to use whenever they break down an assignment. Students should also set personal deadlines (e.g., draft deadline vs final deadline) and record these dates into their calendars/planners.



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Activities to do with students

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Activity: Course Roadmap

Overview

Ask students to create their own personal roadmap for stress reduction when feeling overwhelmed. This plan will look different for each student. Students are given reflection questions to help them draw their roadmap.

Review the [Educator Activity Guide](#) before getting started with this activity.

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- Online synchronous
- Online asynchronous

Format

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- Small groups
- Large groups
- Whole class

Resources

- Module notes
- Paper
- Pen/pencil
- Laptop/tablet
- Students can refer to their course outlines
- [Overcoming Overwhelm Strategies PDF](#)



Overcoming overwhelm

Instructions

1. Encourage students to find ways to manage the stress that comes with heavy workloads and support them by offering opportunities for practice in your course. Refer to the module notes and share the [Overcoming Overwhelm Strategies PDF](#) with students.
2. Present these strategies to students as a class and ask them to offer some ideas. Write these down for students to refer to.
3. Ask students to create their own personal roadmap concerning stress reduction when feeling overwhelmed. One page should be a large space for this plan. Students can refer to their course outlines to identify the times that may need the most attention.
4. Inform students that this plan will look different for each student to reflect individual preferences and approaches.
5. Tell students they can ask themselves the following questions to help them build their plan. The answers they give can shape what they do, when they do it, and how often.
 - When did you feel most overwhelmed with school and other commitments during the previous term or previous year? How did you overcome feeling overwhelmed?
 - When do you expect the busiest and most stressful time in the upcoming term to be and how do you expect to deal with the workload?
 - What is the most important fun or leisure activity you look forward to each week and why?
 - How do you personally deal with stress?
 - Who do you reach for help when feeling stressed?
6. Tell students to keep a copy of this roadmap to consult and to update it during the middle of the term and at the end.

Variation(s)

- Consider asking students to voluntarily share some of their answers and reflections on a moderated, anonymous discussion board so that students can learn some of the more productive ways of managing overwhelm as suggested by their peers.



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Activities to do with students

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Activity: Topics and Themse Schedule

Overview

Students highlight key deadlines (assignments, presentations, exams) in the course syllabus and develop a weekly approach where they focus on a topic or theme each day. (e.g., course readings on Monday, report-writing on Tuesday). This approach is a way to break down the tasks into more manageable pieces.

Review the [Educator Activity Guide](#) before getting started with this activity.

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Format

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- In pairs
- Small groups
- Large groups
- Whole class

Modality

- In person
- Online synchronous
- Online asynchronous

Resources

- Module notes
- Paper
- Pen/pencil
- Laptop/tablet
- Course syllabus



Overcoming overwhelm

Instructions

1. Engage students in a conversation about managing overwhelm and why it matters for their academic success and mental wellness. You can refer to the module notes (www.hiddencurriculum.ca) for detailed examples.
2. Advise students to develop a practical and balanced schedule for their academic commitments in each of their courses.
3. Suggest to students that they highlight the key deadlines for assignments, presentations, and exams in the course syllabus of all their classes. A weekly approach where they focus on a topic or theme each day is a good way to break down the tasks into more manageable pieces.
 - As an example, students could focus on completing textbook readings for the course on Mondays and then focus on completing lab report writeups for the course on Tuesdays. Students can personalize these tasks to reflect their different courses.
4. Have students write this schedule down and reflect regularly on the benefits they gain by committing to it.
5. Tell students they should revisit this schedule regularly (e.g., once a week) and update it as needed.
6. Advise students to schedule breaks to support their self-care and overall wellness.

Variation(s)

- At the end of the term, have students reflect on this schedule and what they will change in the next term and what they will keep.
- Students can also use this type of schedule to set and achieve their personal goals.

