



Something's Gotta Give: Pruning and Prioritizing for the Overcommitted

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❖ Recognizing Overcommitment: Signs That You Might Be Overcommitted

- You feel deadened and drained more than enlivened and fulfilled. Much of life feels like a series of chores.
- You feel chronically resentful of particular commitments and obligations, and/or you all too often find yourself feeling cranky and irritable and responding to others with a snippy or rude tone.
- Your calendar is packed, with no room for spontaneity or small pleasures (e.g., having coffee or lunch with a friend; enjoying an impromptu conversation or game of Frisbee or refreshing walk; attending an optional talk or panel or lecture; visiting a museum or gallery; window-shopping; browsing in a bookstore).
- You feel as if your attention is splintered with the result that you aren't engaging in things as deeply as you'd like and/or not attending to people and to moments as fully as you'd like. You rarely feel fully present, focused.
- You uncharacteristically miss deadlines, drop balls, lose things (e.g., keys), or forget special dates (e.g., birthdays).
- You uncharacteristically get clumsy, make mistakes, and/or injure yourself due to inattentiveness.
- You can't find time to eat a real meal or nourish yourself fully.
- You feel tired most of the time but can't seem to get to bed as early as you need to. (And/or, you don't sleep well because you are anxious about having too much to do in too little time.)
- You feel disdainful of (and/or envious of) someone who gets eight hours of sleep.
- You get sick more than usual (and/or, once you get sick, you don't recover as quickly as usual).
- You get headaches more often than usual.
- You find yourself increasingly reliant on caffeine (or other stimulants).
- People tell you (and/or you yourself acknowledge) that you've neglected your relationships or your responsibilities to a degree or for a duration that is uncharacteristic for you and/or problematic for others.

Note: This list of signs of overcommitment is not meant as a formal assessment. Some of the items on this list could be regarded as natural (or even at times necessary) temporary consequences of a sprint of intense work or a spell of creative immersion and not inherently problematic if they are within the limits of safety, understood to be in the service of an ultimately meaningful pursuit, and punctuated by periods of rest and renewal. But some of these items could potentially be signs of conditions such as depression or attention deficit disorder. In any event, if you are concerned about yourself or your approach to your life, it would make sense to talk with someone. You could speak with a resident dean or resident tutor or with an academic counselor at the Bureau of Study Counsel (617-495-2581) or with a clinician/counselor at the Counseling and Mental Health Services (617-495-2042).

❖ First Steps in Pruning and Prioritizing: A Brief Exercise

prune -- *tr.* 1. To cut off or remove dead or living parts or branches of (a plant, for example) to improve shape or growth. 2. To remove or cut out as superfluous. 3. To reduce: prune a budget -- *intr.* To remove what is superfluous or undesirable.

prioritize -- *tr.* To arrange or deal with in order of importance. -- *intr.* To put things in order of importance.

From *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd Edition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996, 1992.

Commitment, Connection, and Creativity. When we get overcommitted and spread too thin, we tend to neglect our relationships – to others, to self, and to our endeavors – and our creativity tends to suffer. One address to overcommitment is to reconnect with our deeper, core commitments – “Commitments with a Capital C.” A core commitment tends to express itself in what we could call “unbidden caring” – an insistent devotion of our interest, attention, and energy to something that deeply matters to us. A connection with a deeper commitment often manifests as an enlivened, peaceful, or grounded state of being “in the zone.” When we act from the source of our core commitments, we are apt to experience a sense of authenticity, clarity, and satisfaction – a visceral sense of “Yes. This is just what I want to be doing at this moment. It feels so deeply right and true to me.”

We make choices moment to moment, day by day, to say “No” to some things and “Yes” to others. You might try asking yourself, “How is the choice I am making in this instance in the service of what deeply matters to me?” Someone once defined stress as the experience of living in a way that is not congruent with what we value. Conversely, if we experience our choices as being in the service of what is meaningful to us, we can find that some of the challenges we face feel purposeful rather than merely painful and pointless.

With these exercises, consider how choosing to say “No” and “Yes” can help you honor your core commitments:

Pruning/Saying “No” (or “Yes, but with limitations”). What specific steps can you imagine yourself taking this week toward pruning your to-do list to make time or space to connect with your core commitments? (**Examples:** Once this week doing an abbreviated or limited version of a task/project (i.e., saying “No” to the unabbreviated version of the task or project/saying “Yes, but with limitations”) so that the endeavor requires less of you/your time/your energy), or once this week saying or saying “No” to one thing that feels like too much.)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prioritizing/Saying “Yes.” What specific steps can you imagine yourself taking this week toward prioritizing your connection with your core commitments? (**Examples:** Once this week saying “Yes,” even if only for a brief time, to something that helps you to feel connected to what matters to you most deeply; one night, letting yourself get the amount of sleep you need.)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Experimentation. When you take one of these steps, do so in the spirit of an experiment. Gather some data. For instance, stop to notice what it was like for you to try to take the step. Did it feel challenging? If so, how? Worthwhile? If so, how? How might you revise the step to make it a more realistic step for you?

Loss. Change inevitably involves loss. Notice what you would lose, or fear you would lose, in making the change toward not being overcommitted or overscheduled. Losses are more bearable when we claim – and name – the gifts that are also attendant to change. We inevitably make sacrifices for those things we prize most. Sacrifice refers not just to giving up but to an act which makes something sacred. What do you hold sacred enough, to what are you committed enough, that you willingly make sacrifices on its behalf? Notice what you would appreciate, or imagine you would appreciate, if you pruned and prioritized on behalf of your core commitments.

Is less actually more? People say that less is more. Notice whether and when this is true in your experience.