

Overwhelmed

KATHI LIPP &
CHERI GREGORY



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OVERWHELMED

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To
Nancy Silva
Becky Butterfield
Emily Nelson
Stacey Nelson and
Susie Welling

Because you've loved this broken friend for 30 years.
Because at my most overwhelmed, you showed up as
Jesus's hands and feet.
Because you cared for me and my people and were living,
breathing love.

—*Kathi*

To
Annemarie,
my beloved "Chickie."
I'm so glad I get to be your "Mum"!

—*Cheri*

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Contents

Foreword	9
Our Stories.	13

Part One

When You're So Over Being Overwhelmed	21
1. How Did I Get Here?: 5 Ways You Become Overwhelmed	27
2. The Mystery of Me: Understanding the Past and Present You	39
3. Sometimes I'm My Own Worst Enemy: How to Be True to the Future You.	53
4. Building Up Others While Tearing Down My Over- whelm: Creating a Team Where Everyone Wins.	65
5. When It's All Just Too Much: Practical Steps to Get to the End of Your Day	75
6. Overcoming Overwhelmed: Increasing Your Capacity for Joy	87

Part Two

<i>Oh, the Solutions We've Tried!</i> vs. Real-Life Remedies That Rock.	99
7. " <i>Just Try Try Again</i> " vs. Making Peace with Past Failures and Climbing Out of Your Rut.	105

8. “ <i>Just Let It Go</i> ” vs. Managing Your Stuff and Surroundings	123
9. “ <i>Just Go with the Flow</i> ” vs. Personalizing a Well-Defined Work Week and Day	135
10. “ <i>Just Clear Your Calendar</i> ” vs. Creating a Calendar That Works for You	147
11. “ <i>Just Put Your Big-Girl Panties On</i> ” vs. Practicing Self-Care (in a World That Couldn’t Care Less)	157
12. “ <i>Just Wing It</i> ” vs. Cultivating Peace with a Plan.	169
13. “ <i>Just Don’t Take It Personally</i> ” vs. Choosing Input to Invite and Feedback to Forget	181
14. “ <i>Just Get Over Yourself</i> ” vs. Dealing with Crisis Creators and Finding Your Peeps	191
15. “ <i>Just Quit Making Such a Big Deal Out of Nothing</i> ” vs. Negotiating Big Deals and Deal Breakers	201
16. “ <i>If It’s to Be, It’s All Up to Me</i> ” vs. Resting in Sabbath Restoration	215
Conclusion	227
Notes	231

Foreword

I'm not sure how it happens, but I tend to get myself backed into corners filled with deadlines, expectations and unexpected circumstances that make me want to ball up and cry. Several years ago, I got to a place where I felt so overwhelmed and exhausted, I told my husband, J.J., I wanted to resign from everything: motherhood, marriage, ministry, work, and life. You name *it*, I wanted to quit *it*.

Concerned about me, J.J. offered to hang out with our boys for a long weekend so I could go away to get some rest and figure out what I needed to cut back or cut out, with marriage and motherhood not being options. I hesitated, knowing there could be burglars and bears in the mountains, but then I remembered we had a dog. And although she was a little thing, she had a big bark. Problem solved in less than five minutes. I said *yes* and made plans to go to a friend's mountain house after work that Friday.

During my three-hour drive, I imagined my first morning at the mountain house, starting with a cup of coffee and me sitting on the deck overlooking a pristine lake surrounded by ranges of mountains. I'd journal and pray. I'd read my Bible and list out my commitments. I'd settle in and figure out a plan to get myself out of my corner called *overwhelm*.

Unfortunately, that first morning didn't go so well. While making coffee and trying to decide on breakfast, my brain kicked into

rapid fire, bombarding me with the list of tasks piling up *while I was away*. Items on my to-do list lined up like little minions vying for attention in my head. Then I made the mistake of considering everything I could get done while I was away. Decisions I could make, emails I could answer, calls I could return, people's expectations I could live up to!

I felt completely overwhelmed again and couldn't think straight. I needed to get out of the house, so I grabbed my water bottle, took my allergy pill, gave my dog her morning meds, grabbed a leash, and headed out for a walk.

About 30 minutes into our walk, my nose started itching and my eyes started watering. *Why was I having allergy problems?* I specifically remembered taking my allergy meds—the little white pill was in my hand as I sipped my water. Confused, I turned back toward the house. When we arrived, I went straight to the bathroom. There I discovered my allergy pill, still sitting on the counter. And next to it was another bottle filled with tiny white pills. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry when I realized I had accidentally taken my dog's antiseizure medication!

In my frenzy of thoughts, distractions, mental gymnastics, and inability to focus, I had done one thing and not the other. Kind of like the time I meant to put a load of laundry in our washer but found myself in my closet instead and couldn't remember why I was there. But this? This was much worse. Fortunately our dog weighed only 12 pounds, so her pill was low dose. No need for 911. But I was seriously concerned about my sanity.

Oh, I wish I had this book in my hands that day. What I would've given for a roadmap and friends to help me find my way out of the confusion of feeling like *my life was too much* and the shame of feeling like *I wasn't enough*.

Kathy Lipp and Cheri Gregory are those friends! They have been

where we are, and in this book they share the good, the bad, and the beautiful hope found in their stories of *overwhelmed*! Chapter by chapter they will show you how to identify what factors overwhelm you most, and you'll discover what *overwhelmed* looks and feels like in your own life. Through their wisdom and insightful tools, Kathi and Cheri will help you pre-decide how to react when *overwhelm* sneaks up on you. In your hands, you hold a gift. As you read be sure to take notes and plan ahead for the happiness and wholeness of your future self.

Not only are Kathi and Cheri two great friends, they are women I deeply respect and trust. They are what I call "life-preserver people." They have been there during seasons of my life when I felt like I was drowning, and God sent them to help rescue me. Oh, how I wish I had known these two in my twenties and thirties because I seriously needed this book a long time ago!

Renee Swope

Word-lover | Story-teller | Grace-needer

Award-winning author of *A Confident Heart*

Our Stories

Cheri's Story

Kathi Lipp is one of my best friends. We are both authors and speakers. Beyond that, we have almost nothing in common.

Kathi is forward-thinking. I obsessively rehearse my past mistakes.

Kathi is level-headed. I am all over the map. One day I'm gushing like Sally Fields's "You like me! Right now, you like me!"¹ and the next I'm whining, "Nobody loves me. Everybody hates me. Guess I'll go eat worms!"².

Kathi is drama-free. My life feels like an ongoing soap opera where I play multiple characters.

For the last decade, Kathi's speed-dial number has been my panic button. She has talked me off more ledges than I can count. During my first year of teaching AP English to 25 students I was convinced hated me, Kathi assured me, "Your second year will be better." (It was.) When I freaked out after learning my daughter had gotten several dozen tattoos, Kathi told me, "You two will work this out." (We did.) Each time I called to lament that the talk I'd just given had bombed, Kathi said, "I'm sure it went better than you think." (It had.)

I've pretty much lived in a constant state of overwhelm my entire life. In the ten years we've known each other, Kathi has tried her best to help me out.

But five years ago, we suddenly had one more thing in common: We both felt totally overwhelmed.

Over the span of a few weeks, multiple major life events blindsided Kathi one after the other. She became as overwhelmed as I'd ever been. While I felt sorry that she was now stuck with me in this crazy place known as overwhelmed, I was glad to finally have company. Overwhelmed feels far more survivable with a friend.

But then, to my surprise, Kathi found her way out. She showed me that overwhelmed is neither inevitable nor inescapable. She made systematic, intentional choices to get out of overwhelmed. She gave me hope that I could too.

Throughout this book—as we look in Part One at why and how we become overwhelmed and in Part Two as we explore practical solutions—Kathi will play the role for you she's played for me: compassionate guide and motivating mentor. To begin each chapter, she'll share her stories and strategies with her trademark humor, how-to's, and hope.

I'll be your fellow learner, following along to share how I've tried, applied, and customized Kathi's solutions and systems to live with less drama, more delight.

We'll end each chapter with “Taking the Next Faithful Step” and a suggested prayer by our friend Elisa Gray, asking God for His guidance as you address your overwhelmed.

Kathi's Story

What does overwhelmed feel like to me?

Overwhelmed feels like stupidity.

I feel as though I should know what is going on, how to fix it, and what my next step should be. But I don't.

I feel as though everyone is judging me because surely they would know what to do. And if only I were smarter, better, more

organized, in better shape, a better parent, a better mom, then I would not be facing this current situation, or at least I would have a plan for getting out of it.

I remember going home with my son Justen the day after he was born. I'd taken all the parenting classes, read all the books, done all the prep, and bought all the equipment. I don't know how I could have been more prepared.

But then, in the matter of what seemed like moments (it was probably more like 24 hours), they were sending me home with a baby. And all that anticipation, excitement, and longing turned into abject fear.

What if I did something wrong?

What if he wouldn't eat?

What if he wouldn't sleep?

What if I did something to make him sick?

What if I broke his arm while putting it into the Snuggli?

I couldn't believe these professionals were letting me take my precious newborn home. Surely there was someone more qualified to take care of him than I was.

I felt dumb.

I felt sure everyone except for me was a natural mom.

I felt inadequate and scared.

I felt overwhelmed.

And overwhelmed? It's a lousy place to be.

Oh sure, overwhelmed comes in different degrees and types (we will get into that, I promise). Overwhelmed can be too much to do in too little time. Or bad circumstances piling up on top of one another.

But the overwhelmed that slays me, the overwhelmed that plays with my heart and my mind and makes me believe I'm worthless, is the overwhelmed born out of shame. It's that kind of overwhelmed

that starts to chip away at my soul. That's the overwhelmed that keeps me from being all that God has designed me to be.



Overwhelmed
feels like
stupidity.

Overwhelmed in any of its forms is damaging to who we are. Busyness. Bad choices. Bad circumstances. But the shaming overwhelm is the one I need to fight against with every fiber of my being. Because the overwhelm fueled by shame? That's my kryptonite. It makes me shut down and unable to accomplish anything. It makes me quit before I start, and it tells me I'm worthless.

I've felt this type of overwhelm many times in my life, but the time I had to put a fork in the road—had to make a change in how I was living and what I was doing—was five years ago when I shared about my place of overwhelmed with my blog readers:

It's been a long few months.

It all started with a busy schedule. A busy "Look how many places want me to speak!" kind of schedule plus a book deadline (neither of these were a surprise) that were both great for the ego (amazing, actually). But as you well know, the ego is a tricky thing. You can be busy doing God's work, all the while convincing yourself that working for Him and being with Him are the same thing.

So take some busy and then throw in:

- not spending enough time with God
- a strained relationship with one of my kids
- my mom's cancer diagnosis
- and (just for fun) whooping cough

This? Right here? Is the perfect Food Network recipe for a full-blown meltdown.

Okay, so I haven't taken to sitting in a corner and drooling into a tin cup, but I have sat in the parking lot of many

a speaking engagement and cried and cried for one reason and one reason only: I felt like a fraud.

For the past four months, I've felt so raw and exhausted that I swing wildly between two extremes: Either I can't crack a Bible without going into a full-on ugly cry or the words on the page feel like they are written to someone else, in a foreign language, in invisible ink. Either I can't sit through a worship service without having complete strangers come up to me and ask if there is anything they can do. (That is, the complete strangers who aren't avoiding my gaze, because who wants to interact with the crazy woman?) Or I just sit there, listening to the words of the music and the preacher thinking, *Okay, that may work in theory, but not in my life, apparently.*

How are you supposed to teach God's Word when you feel as though you will either fall apart on stage or that every encounter you've had with God recently felt dry, formal, and awkward?

This is not a fun place to be in—the desert place. Yes, it's true, we all spend some time there. Those times when everything feels wrong and out of sorts. Those times when picking up your Bible feels like the hardest thing you will ever do. Those times when you wonder if God is really there, and if so, why isn't He doing some of the talking?

This is when I feel the most overwhelmed. When I feel as though I should be handling everything on my plate better than I am.

When I feel as though I should know what to do.

When I feel as though it should be easier to rely on God than it is.

Whatever your constellation of overwhelmed, we all have one thing in common: Overwhelmed turns us into someone we never wanted to be. Someone God never created us to be.

But something I've noticed over the past several years worries me more than that feeling of overwhelmed: how being overwhelmed seems to be accepted.



Overwhelmed
turns us into
someone we
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God never
created us to be.

As if God designed us to live stressed-out, crazy-making, shame-filled lives. As if the God of the universe said, “I’m going to require everything and equip you with nothing.” As if God designed overwhelmed as our default. If you believe that’s true, then this book is not for you.

Everyone loves to talk about how overwhelmed they are. This book is for women who want to do something about it.

Now, if this statement overwhelms you, hang in there with us. We’re not suggesting you attempt an overnight overhaul of your entire life. (Been there, done that, T-shirt was ugly.) But if you’re at a place in your life where you’re saying, “I need a change!” then this book is for you.

The number one question we get when we tell people the title of the book we’re writing is “So you don’t get overwhelmed anymore?”

We aren’t women who have done it perfectly. (Oh, we’ve tried, but that didn’t work out so well for us.) We’re still breathing. So yes, we still get overwhelmed.

You’re not going to get un-overwhelmed overnight. We’re going to give you a variety of triage tools and walk you through intentional long-term change that lasts. We believe anyone can find great value in this book. Even if all you can do is one small step at a time, that is far, far better than doing nothing.

We are never going to be completely free of overwhelming circumstances. But when you start to feel those feelings, you want to have a process to go through to break it down. So when you have that trigger, you’ll automatically ask, *What’s making me feel overwhelmed? What tools can I use in this situation?*

We may be the writers of this book, but you, dear reader, are the author of the outcome. The words are easy, but the work is hard.

The good news? You have a couple of coaches who have worked through this process and seen it work. And now we want to offer the same to you. Our hope is to equip you to

- expand your capacity for joy, regardless of your current circumstances
- make intentional choices today that serve you tomorrow
- trade the to-do list that controls you for a calendar that creates space for your life
- decide whose feedback to forget and whose input to invite
- replace fear of the future with peace in the present

Are you ready? The life you were designed to live is waiting for you on the other side of overwhelmed.

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and
peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow
with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

ROMANS 15:13

Part One

When You're So Over Being Overwhelmed

Identifying the Hurts Behind the Mayhem

If you look up the word *overwhelmed* in a dictionary, you'll find several meanings:

- turned upside down
- submerged completely
- washed over, as by a big wave

Reading these I think, *Yes, this is exactly what overwhelmed feels like!* Whether it's a tidal wave of external circumstances looming above or an emotion ocean churning within, overwhelmed makes us gasp for air, because we're going under.

Overwhelmed is deceptive. It takes on all sorts of disguises and tricks us into believing we can't deal with it, because, well, it's just so overwhelming. But we've discovered there are different kinds of overwhelmed. So we've come up with this little quiz to help you

discover what particular kind of overwhelmed you're dealing with. When you know the cause, it's so much easier to apply a cure.

Self-Assessment

Directions: Mark each statement that is true or partly true for you, either for your whole life or in one aspect where you're feeling particularly overwhelmed.

1. _____ I feel as though I have few/no good options.
2. _____ Nobody really seems to understand why I feel so overwhelmed.
3. _____ I often put off important tasks until "later."
4. _____ I feel as though I shouldn't have to ask for help.
5. _____ I've been struggling with illness and/or injury (my own or that of someone I love).
6. _____ When good things happen, I worry they won't last.
7. _____ I wish I could know if I'm making the right decision(s).
8. _____ I feel embarrassed for being overwhelmed.
9. _____ Sometimes I say yes when I need to say no.
10. _____ I should be able to handle my life better than this by now.
11. _____ My caretaker role(s) keeps me constantly busy.
12. _____ I would love to experience more joy.
13. _____ I have trouble following through on the decision(s) I've made.
14. _____ Nobody I know gets as overwhelmed as I do.
15. _____ My personal values are not written down anywhere.

16. _____ Seeking help feels selfish to me.
17. _____ Emergency situations just keep hitting, one after the other.
18. _____ Sometimes I compare myself to others and wish I had what they have.
19. _____ I'm dealing with the consequences of poor past decisions.
20. _____ People have told me, "You're just too sensitive."
21. _____ Sometimes my values shift to match the circumstances of the moment.
22. _____ I offer help, but I don't accept help.
23. _____ If I weren't so overwhelmed, I'd be a better friend (or mother, wife, and so on).
24. _____ I wish I felt happier.
25. _____ I'm coping with circumstances I didn't cause or choose.
26. _____ I feel ashamed by how overwhelmed I become.
27. _____ My priorities seem to change according to the situation I'm in.
28. _____ I can count on a handful of people in my life.
29. _____ Constant crisis has become my "new normal."
30. _____ I long to laugh more.
31. _____ Decision-making tires me out.
32. _____ What overwhelms me doesn't seem to overwhelm other people.
33. _____ Sometimes I wonder who I really am.

34. _____ I would love a support team, but I don't know how to build one.
35. _____ I wish I knew how to “move on” from challenging experiences.
36. _____ I'd like to learn how to experience greater contentment.

What Kind of Overwhelmed Are You Feeling?

Now, transfer your checkmarks from above to the blanks below. Two or more checks in a category are a warning that you're wrestling with this specific kind of overwhelm.

1. Are you overwhelmed by decision fatigue?

_____ Question 1 _____ Question 7 _____ Question 13
 _____ Question 19 _____ Question 25 _____ Question 31

In chapter 1 we'll explore some ways you can deal with difficult decisions.

2. Are you overwhelmed because you don't know your true self?

_____ Question 2 _____ Question 8 _____ Question 14
 _____ Question 20 _____ Question 26 _____ Question 32

In chapter 2 we'll explore some ways you can work with your own personality type and temperament, and better appreciate other people's personalities and temperaments.

3. Are you overwhelmed because you're not being true to yourself?

_____ Question 3 _____ Question 9 _____ Question 15
 _____ Question 21 _____ Question 27 _____ Question 33

In chapter 3, we'll explore some ways you can pre-decide and live out your true values.

4. Are you overwhelmed from doing too much for too many with too little for too long?

_____ Question 4 _____ Question 10 _____ Question 16
_____ Question 22 _____ Question 28 _____ Question 34

In chapter 4, we'll explore some ways you can build your team and be a team player for others.

5. Are you overwhelmed by unexpected emergencies?

_____ Question 5 _____ Question 11 _____ Question 17
_____ Question 23 _____ Question 29 _____ Question 35

In chapter 5, we'll explore some ways you can survive and even thrive amid crisis.

6. Are you overwhelmed by disappointment and worry?

_____ Question 6 _____ Question 12 _____ Question 18
_____ Question 24 _____ Question 30 _____ Question 36

In chapter 6, we'll explore some ways you can expand your capacity for joy, regardless of your circumstances.

Now that you have a better idea of where you are, we need to spend a little time figuring out how you got here. And then, what you can do about it.

How Did I Get Here?

5 Ways You Become Overwhelmed

Vizzini: *He didn't fall? Inconceivable!*

Inigo: *You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.*

THE PRINCESS BRIDE

Kathi

The quote from above is what I think to myself when I ask someone how she's doing and she responds, "Overwhelmed!" and then goes on to explain that she has to make an unexpected trip to the pharmacy.

If I'm going through a huge family crisis or an aspect of my business is teetering on disaster, and you are "overwhelmed" by an extra errand, my brain immediately goes to "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

But reflecting on my own life, I've come to realize that no matter how we get there—whether it's a life-and-death situation or the feeling that we're falling further and further behind—overwhelmed is overwhelmed.

And it feels terrible.

When it comes to feeling overwhelmed, one definition does not fit all.

However, we can look for signs and patterns. Here are five common ways we become overwhelmed by the daily decisions we each face. By identifying these overwhelming



When it comes to feeling overwhelmed, one definition does not fit all.

circumstances, we empower ourselves to prepare for these situations, and when possible, avoid them altogether.

Which of these scenarios sounds familiar?

**I become overwhelmed when I can't seem to
make new decisions.**

"I have to ..." is the most overwhelming sentence in the English language.

- I have to stay in this job. I could never find another job that pays this well.
- I have to resign myself to a bad marriage. He will never change.
- I've blown it with my kids. It's too late to parent differently.

Stuck.

No end in sight.

It's all up to me.

This is how I felt about my writing career several years ago. I felt as though I wasn't making a difference in anyone's life.

But I couldn't quit. I had too many people relying on me.

Every day, I fantasized about quitting. What would it be like to have a job where I punched in and out? One where I didn't worry about work when I got home at night? Just thinking about it felt glorious.

I started to talk it over with my husband, Roger. "This job is killing me. I don't get to spend enough time with you. I feel behind on everything in our lives. And I don't feel as though I'm making a difference with the books I'm writing or the audiences I'm speaking to. I feel completely stuck."

That's when he said something revolutionary.

"You can quit."

He knew I had deadlines and obligations. But he pointed out that they weren't forever. We could put a plan into action to start phasing out everything. We could survive for a while on just his salary while I decided what to do with my life.

And when Roger pointed out that I had options, I felt instantly more peaceful.

I had been telling myself that he would be so disappointed in me if I gave up everything we'd worked for. He would be upset that we'd poured so much into this ministry and didn't see a return.

But I forgot that my husband and I are on each other's teams. I'm never in anything alone. So when he said, "You have options," even without circumstances changing, I instantly felt less overwhelmed.

Feeling as though you have no options is overwhelming.



Feeling as though you have no options is overwhelming.

I become overwhelmed when I have trouble making the right decision.

We recently celebrated my stepdaughter's wedding. It was an amazing weekend and Amanda had the dream wedding she'd hoped for. But as we all know, a dream wedding can sometimes be a nightmare for those who are pulling it off.

I thought I was showing up early in my T-shirt and grubby jeans to help fold napkins and fluff table decorations. But things didn't go according to plan.

Our amazing wedding coordinator, Nancy, had a family emergency the morning of the wedding. Let me state for the record that the fact that Nancy showed up at all speaks to her character. She is

a gift. (Who else on the planet says, “Let me plan your stepdaughter’s wedding for you, get the crew together, and make it magical”?). But this family emergency set into motion a chain reaction of events that couldn’t be avoided:

- The truck with all the wedding decorations arrived an hour late.
- Nancy wasn’t available to answer questions.
- Everything had to get done in half the time we expected.

My daughter, Kimber, was in charge of all the decorating and setting up the photo booths, guest book area, and so on. Even she, who normally is totally in charge of every situation, started to panic.

Here is what made us feel overwhelmed:

- *We didn’t have enough information*—Someone else had the magic binder with all the details about what the bride wanted.
- *We were making decisions over our pay grade*—The tablecloths didn’t have holes in them, but we needed to put umbrellas in the tables. It was suddenly up to me to decide that we were going to spear all those tablecloths—potentially costing us hundreds if not thousands of dollars.
- *We didn’t know what the expectations were*—Who was supposed to be doing what? How did Nancy want the napkins folded? Were we supposed to have all the pumpkin-colored napkins on one table and the plum-colored napkins on another, or were we supposed to alternate the colors at each place setting?
- *We had too many bosses to please*—No one wanted to be

in charge, but everyone had an opinion about how I should be doing things. And remember—I'm the step-mom. That situation was fraught with trouble.

- *We didn't have all the tools*—The supply truck hadn't made it, so we had some things but not others.
- *We didn't have the answers people needed*—Everyone had a million questions I couldn't answer.

Trying to make the right decisions when you lack information, resources, and/or authority is overwhelming.

I become overwhelmed when I don't execute the decisions I've already made.

Planning with my team is one of my favorite things to do in my ministry. They are a bunch of bright, gifted women (and one guy). We have the best time dreaming up new ideas.

Our plans always look great on paper. But when it comes to executing, that's when the obstacles come up. Now what?

So we get stuck. Immobilized. Overwhelmed.

Instead of looking at the one next step we can take, our natural response is to get overwhelmed by the next six hundred steps we have to take. We get overwhelmed by what is going to happen six months from now. And while that's valid to consider, we can't let what may (or may not) happen six months from now make our decisions for us.

It's overwhelming to know what needs to be done but to watch yourself, day in and day out, not doing it.

I become overwhelmed when I'm dealing with consequences of poor past decisions.

Okay, I have too many "poor past decisions" to list. The biggies include:

- Having sex before I was married (which led to a pregnancy, which wasn't a mistake. But the sex? Definitely.)
- Marrying someone who was not God's first choice for me
- Quitting college

The consequences of past decisions—even those that seemed insignificant at the time—can follow you for years, making you feel as though you can never get free from them. And that trapped feeling is overwhelming.

I once decided to do a project with another person who was a much bigger name (I know that shouldn't matter, but at the time, it really did). It was huge and involved and exciting, and because this person was a “bigger name” than I was, I was thrilled to get to work with her.

Until the work started.

My team and I ended up doing 90 percent of the work. The other person? Complained that she wasn't getting paid enough.



That sense of being trapped with the long-term consequences of a short-term poor decision can leave you feeling completely overwhelmed.

And for that next year, I felt trapped.

What I should have done? Clearly laid out a work plan that we could both live with.

What I actually did? Told myself, “Yay! Someone loves me and chose me, and I'll do whatever because I'm just so happy that someone wants to work with me.”

Big mistake.

That sense of being trapped with the long-term consequences of a short-term poor decision can leave you feeling completely overwhelmed.

I become overwhelmed when I'm coping with life circumstances that involve(d) little-to-no choice.

I'd just left our Easter service at church. Roger was staying for the second service since he was working in the tech booth to pull off the biggest services of the year. So I was surprised to get a phone call from him just after I left. I assumed he was going to ask me to bring him a Starbucks. Lucky for him, I'd just pulled into a Starbucks.

"Are you home yet?" he asked.

"No."

"Okay, call me when you get home." He sounded upset.

"What is it? I'm in a parking lot. I'm not driving."

"Mary Jane's been in an accident. Kathi, she didn't make it."

Mary Jane was Roger's stepmom. Roger didn't grow up with her, but he knew how important she was to me. As Roger's second wife, I came into a family with a lot of relationships already established. Mary Jane knew what that was like and made me feel welcomed.

Now she was gone. Just gone.

Roger got someone to cover for him at church, and we went into action mode. Packing, purchasing outrageously expensive plane tickets, making memorial service plans, finding someone to watch our herd (two cats and a dog). When we arrived in Georgia the next day, after 16 hours of flights and more driving to get to where we were staying, we were already exhausted. The memorial was scheduled for Tuesday, just two days after Mary Jane's accident. Roger's dad had a long list of things he wanted us to get done, and there was family tension all around. We spent a whirlwind week doing our best to love on Mary Jane's daughters and support Roger's dad through this tragic loss.

As soon as we got home, we dove back into the fray, catching up with a week of backlogged work. That's when it all came to a head.

I was exhausted, walking around in a fog. I couldn't think

straight. I couldn't decide the simplest of things. What would we have for dinner? What did we need at the store? Should I wash the load of jeans or towels first?



I had no control over the crisis, but now the crisis had control over me.

I had no control over the crisis, but now the crisis had control over me.

And this is exactly what can happen when you are overwhelmed by a situation you have no control over, be it an accident, illness, death, or something else.

Maybe you are the one who's sick, hurt, or in pain. Or perhaps you are the caretaker in the situation. Both of those roles can leave you in a place of feeling completely overwhelmed.

Cheri

5 Habits for Handling Decision Fatigue

When Kathi called to say, "I think decision fatigue causes 80 percent of our overwhelm!" I nodded like a good friend. But I didn't bother taking notes. A topic as broad as "what overwhelms us" couldn't possibly boil down to something as basic as *decisions*.

Could it?

Per our idea-promoter vs. naysayer partnership, I begrudgingly put Kathi's theory to the test. Within days, I was calling her back to admit, "You were right. I was...less right."³ Here are five facts I've discovered about decision fatigue, along with five healthy habits that keep decision-making from becoming quite so overwhelming.

Fact #1: You can't make new decisions until you know you have options.

This infuriating quote regularly makes the rounds on social

media: “The first time you make a mistake, it’s a mistake. The second time, it’s a choice.”

Each time it shows up, I yell at the screen, “That’s not necessarily true! The second time it’s a choice only if I’m aware it was a mistake and know other options are available!” Choice requires options.



Choice requires options.

To make new decisions, we must know we have alternatives. It doesn’t matter if everyone around us sees tons of possibilities; we have to perceive the options for ourselves.

Healthy Habit #1:

When I find myself sinking beneath overwhelming beliefs like *This is the way I’ve always done it* or *I can’t see any other possibility*, I remind myself *I can make new decisions* and *I have options*.

Fact #2: Trying to make the perfect decision is crazy-making.

For my first 45 years of life, I lived in constant fear of making mistakes. During these decades of error terror, I tried to think through every possible worst-case scenario for each decision: “Plan A: I could ask her to ... But then she might ... Which would mean that he would ... And that would lead to them choosing...So unless I want to ... Unacceptable. Plan B: I could tell her to ...”

I would imagine dozens of hypothetical situations, none of which were happening, but all of which were so absorbing that I experienced emotional reactions as if they were actually occurring. Talk about exhausting!

In our attempts to make *the* right decision, we can live so many hypothetical lives that we have neither time nor energy to live our real lives well.

Healthy Habit #2:

I feel far less overwhelmed when I quit demanding *the* perfect choice and give myself permission to make a “good enough” decision.

Fact #3: Conviction + Avoidance = Guilt**Conviction + Obedience = Freedom**

If stalling were an Olympic sport, I'd be a gold medalist. I have seemingly virtuous reasons for not executing a decision, like the sudden impulse to clean the house. With a toothbrush. Plus plenty of selfish reasons, from *I'm just not feeling it right now* to *I'll do what I want, the way I want, when I want*.

Problem is, procrastination makes us feel like losers. It's overwhelming and can become downright demoralizing. When we actively avoid obedience, we feel the truth of James 4:17 at a heart level: "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them."

Healthy Habit #3:

When I talk with God about my avoidance, He reveals the deeper issues, which always turn out to be fear-related. As I pray-cess (process through prayer) my fears, God's love and grace free me to move forward, leaving all my overwhelming guilt behind. Then I can echo Paul: "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25).

Fact #4: "The more persecuted I feel, the less overwhelmed I am!" said no one ever.

I totaled my husband's car at the start of spring break. One split-second bad choice cost us a week of vacation and years of car payments. It. Felt. So. Completely. Unfair. *I try so hard in so many areas of my life, I did not need this on top of everything else...*

The problem with pity parties is that nobody brings us gifts. And the entertainment is terrible.

Healthy Habit #4:

For me, responsibly accepting the consequences of a poor past

decision is an ongoing balancing act. Some days I lean toward persecution. Other days I teeter toward punishment. I feel far less overwhelmed when I'm in the middle ground of accepting responsibility.

Fact #5: Decision-making takes extra effort in the middle of messy.

Seven months ago, my mother died suddenly after a long battle with Alzheimer's disease. Two months ago, my father held a family dinner to introduce us to his "lady friend"; it turned into a surprise engagement party. My daughter is trying to find a place she can afford to live; our son just graduated from college and moved back home. Most days, I feel as though someone threw my heart in a blender, added all the feels, and hit "puree."

Pixar's *Inside Out* helped many of us appreciate how closely Joy and Sadness work together during complex life circumstances. But we can still be blindsided by how draining even basic decision-making becomes when life gets complicated. Research shows that our fluid intelligence—our general ability to think abstractly, reason, identify patterns, solve problems, and discern relationships—drops significantly when we are overwhelmed.⁴

Healthy Habit #5:

When I find myself struggling with what should be simple choices, I reassure myself that the reason I'm feeling overwhelmed is not that I'm stupid. It's the other way around: I'm feeling stupid because I'm so overwhelmed.



The reason I'm feeling overwhelmed is not that I'm stupid. It's the other way around: I'm feeling stupid because I'm so overwhelmed.

Taking the Next Most Faithful Step

1. One “aha” I had while reading this chapter was ...
 2. One reason I’m feeling overwhelmed right now is ...
 3. One healthy habit I can begin right now is ...
-

Father God,

Help me remember that the only thing I have to do is let myself be loved by You. Help me to trust You completely and not fear. When life feels overwhelming, I will turn to You. Let me remember that nothing can change my value to You.

Love, Me