Too busy? Try asking 4 questions

Categories : [Productivity](#)

Tagged as : [Books](#), [data](#), [David Allen](#), [Filter](#), [Information overload](#), [Mindfulness bell](#), [Omnifocus](#), [Overwhelm](#), [Productivity](#), [Stress](#), [Tony Schwartz](#)

Date : July 3, 2012

More new information has been produced in the last 30 years than in the previous 5,000 combined.

That comes from [Information Anxiety](#)...which was written in 1989.

More recently, a [2009 study](#) released by UC San Diego stated that the average American consumes 100,000 words of information per day. This post is near 1,000 words, so that's equivalent to reading every word of this, over 100 times, every day. I appreciate your interest in my writing but that's a bit much! This bombardment of information (even if we enjoy most of it)

has some severe implications; for many it contributes to a feeling of constantly being overloaded.

Above are some books I recently ordered from Amazon. They are sitting in a basement. I had great intentions when ordering them but somehow I've been too busy to read them. Whenever I look at this bookshelf a slight anxiety arises as I am reminded of a perceived lack of time and energy.

While my Amazon purchase habits are (hopefully) out of the norm, I don't think I'm alone in feeling overloaded. The most common response I hear when asking friends how they've been is **'busy'**. We're all busy. And while there may be many causes for this business, there are ways to look deeply into how we are contributing to the resulting anxiety that often arises.

Over time, through trail and error, I've found a few reliable questions to ask myself when I am feeling overwhelmed with too much to do. I share these with an intention of being useful in your life:

1. Is there unavoidable time to rest?
It may seem strange to start by talking about rest, but I find that if I don't build in *unavoidable* time to rest while doing any activity, I won't. I'll delay or skip lunch, I'll keep going past the point of no (productivity) return and I'll burn myself out. It takes longer to recover from this burnout than if I would have rested in the first place, so rest is critical. Couple practical tools here:

Obey the 90 minute rule - [Research](#) has shown 90 minutes is about the length we can sustain attention before it starts to taper off. Sounds about right. When having meetings or phone calls, cap them at 90 minutes. When listening to music while working, set playlists that are ~90 minutes in length. When they finish, force yourself to get up and do something else for 5 minutes, even if it's just breathing and walking around your space.

Mindfulness bells - Set a bell to ring every 30 minutes while you're working. When the bell rings (~20 seconds in length) pause whatever you're doing & close your eyes, take a full in-breath and out-breath, and then return to your work. This takes virtually no effort and can help maintain focus and calm. I use [this website](#) when I'm on my computer and [this app](#) on my iPhone.

2. Is my 'filter' too wide?
Once I'm sure that I'm resting enough, my next question relates to how much information is coming in. It's useful to make a distinction between 'short-term' and 'long-term' filters.

-Short-term filters are those sources of information which are relatively easy to change. In the offline world this is the many commitments you have outside of work. In the online world, this is how many email lists you're subscribed to, how many friends you check regularly on facebook or other social sites, how many websites you visit and how frequently, etc. I often find that when I'm feeling overly optimistic I decide to sign-up for a bunch of email lists, and then a month later my inbox is out of control with un-reads. As social humans it can be difficult to say "no", but it has become increasingly necessary for sanity.

-A *long-term filter* would be your current job responsibilities. In an ultimate sense, the amount of things you are being asked to do at your job is within your control (i.e. you are working by choice, even if it may not seem like it). Your ability to adjust this filter depends on the conditions of your job: if you work for a large company you are less likely to have the freedom to change this filter, whereas if you work at a small shop you probably have more autonomy.
Filters will likely expand and shrink on their own over time, but it's good to know when a wide filter is the source of anxiety.

Related to this is examining *how often you are notified of incoming information.*
I thought it was great when Google Notifier came out so that a pop up would appear on my desktop with all my unread messages. Then after a while I disabled it because all it did was distract me by reminding me of everything I wasn't doing. What is critical here is defining how often you 'need' to be notified, and then going from there. Do you really need to have a pop-up on your phone every time someone sends you Facebook message? Maybe you do, but maybe you don't.

3. How am I processing and organizing my information?
After I'm comfortable with what & how much content is coming in, the next question is how I'm handling everything.

Are you using your email inbox to hold everything? Is your desktop full of folders and sticky notes? Everybody has their own 'system' of keeping track of things, but most people don't review it regularly to see if it needs to be overhauled...they just slowly adapt & add-on frankenstein style when absolutely necessary. After reading Getting Things Done I completely revamped how I process and organize information. If an email takes less than 2 minutes to respond to, I do it immediately. If someone I'm talking to says I should check out ____ article/song/movie, I write it down, file it in my queue of article/songs/movies, and follow-up with the person once I've checked it out. With a reliable system in place your brain has more capacity because it isn't worrying about remembering to-dos.

After doing my research I landed on two programs to help me accomplish these tasks, which I use virtually every day:
-Omnifocus to help keep track of all of my projects and 'to-dos'
-Circus Ponies to serve as a notebook/journal.

Finally, perhaps the most important question...to be asked when you're feeling particularly overloaded by a to-do list with no end in sight:

4. Honestly, what would happen if I didn't do this right now?
The answer may surprise you.

-

What's most important for me is to view this process as a practice. I find that in the morning I can feel great, with a clear mind, on top of everything, and then by mid-afternoon I can feel totally swamped having no idea what to do next. All there is to do is dust myself off and begin

again. And again. And again.

Anything you would add to this list? Please share.

In writing this I am indebted to David Allen & Tony Schwartz for being there and doing what they do