

NAMING
and
TAMING *Overwhelm*

For Healthcare & Human Service Providers



Sarri Gilman, MA, MFT

Naming and Taming Overwhelm For Healthcare and Human Service Providers

Book Excerpt

Foreword

If you've picked up this book, we might have something in common. Let me tell you, you've come to the right place. Sarri Gilman is the real deal, and *Naming and Taming Overwhelm* is the book we all need.

We live in interesting times. Information is coming at us at a rate never seen before in history. Our brains are not wired for this. For those of us with a passion and a dedication to helping others, the overwhelm can get intense as we see more and more clients, our patients, and our community members living under increasingly stressful situations. A pileup of research tells us the damage toxic stress can do to our bodies and our opportunities for whole, healthy lives.

Meanwhile, the organizations within which we work or with whom we interface are also increasingly overwhelmed. Budget problems are causing cutbacks. Caseloads are going up. Everyone is expected to "do more with less" at "optimal efficiency." Administrators and managers in health and human service systems are also experiencing the stress of overwhelmed systems.

I've known Sarri for about twenty years. When I first met her, she was in the midst of work that was causing her great stress and overwhelm. It was great work. Important work. Saving lives of young people on a daily basis. This work was started from a place of personal calling and devotion to making the world a better place. Does this sound familiar? It should. This book is written for all of us who are called to help others.

That calling to help others comes from deep in our spirit and brings us great joy and profound meaning. As we understand more from research these days, having meaningful activities in our lives is literally good for our health. Giving to others is literally good for our health. This is possibly the ultimate example of enlightened self-interest. And, yet...

Too many of us have found ourselves and our organizations mired in overwhelm. Overwhelm feels like a Paleolithic era tar pit. We get stuck in it and suddenly, the more we struggle and flail, using the same action that got us there in the first place, the more we sink and get stuck. Until we feel we can't breathe. And maybe we literally can't, as overwhelm can tip some of us into severe anxiety and panic. This is overwhelm. Sarri is here to help you get out of that tar pit.

Sarri's path has brought her into close contact with overwhelm in both her personal life and her professional life. She knows what's she's talking about based on deep intimacy as well as strong, relevant professional and clinical training. This is a potent brew.

Talking with Sarri while she was writing this book got me so excited about what is being shared with you now. Sarri has distilled down her thirty years of experience as a visionary leader, a licensed counselor, a practiced trainer, and a highly acclaimed author into this book. When I first read the manuscript, I was impressed by the way she had compressed every idea and offering into the most simple and most economical use of words possible. That's hard to do!

Every word in this book counts. Sarri hasn't burdened us with any extra words. She doesn't want her book to overwhelm you. It's not another "should" or "to do." (Oh, you have those lists too? Happy to meet you, friend...) She takes our hand on page one and says (in my mind), "Come with me. I know the way through this maze of overwhelm. We'll go together, and we'll rest as often as you need along the way." I cried more than once reading this book. Sometimes I cried because a learning hit a personal nerve, but I cried just as often at the boundless love and deep caring I could feel on every page.

I had the opportunity seventeen years ago to work with Sarri for a period. She had asked me to come in and help her organization. She was in overwhelm and so was the agency. Sarri is a powerful force of nature, and she had grown a small emergency shelter for homeless youth into a significant enterprise. Managing this complex entity wasn't something she had the calling or the training to do. She figured out how to get help, and one of those forms of help was me.

But let me be clear: I was the one who got the better of the deal. As we worked in partnership to help her agency catch up with the current demands and provide needed systems for her team, Sarri was also teaching me about how to value myself and what I uniquely bring to the table. She was very firm about it. Okay, she was actually very pushy about it! (She's laughing right now as she reads this). I learned lessons from that time that remain valuable and relevant to me today.

For all these reasons and more, it is such a gift to have the Foundation for Healthy

Generations partnering with Sarri to bring needed resources and tools to help people “stay well while doing good.” At Healthy Gen, our mission is to create enduring health equity. We believe that people and communities thrive when all are healthy, included, and connected. Health equity work is hard. It’s a long game. Healthy Gen’s role is to be a catalyst to support the actions of the many people across many disciplines and in many communities who are needed to do the work of shifting our way of thinking from “me to we” so that all can have the same opportunity to have a healthy, whole life.

In our role as the “help that helps” to the helpers (that would be you!), we bring many resources to bear. One such resource is philanthropic giving, including “attention philanthropy,” in which we use our resources to spotlight great things that are happening, especially those things that might otherwise go unnoticed in the crazy hubbub of our current time. We also support public/private coalitions doing the real work with a commitment to a system of community engagement. We have refined this system to create authentic connection and illuminate more clearly the meaning of key health and social determinant data. In addition, we provide a variety of free trainings and resources and do our best to show up as people whenever we can and wherever it seems most useful.

This work is not for the faint of heart. We know that. You know that. We’re committed to that and so are you. But that doesn’t mean we don’t get mired in overwhelm too, no matter how good we are at this work. It may even be true that the better you are at it, the more at risk for overwhelm you will find yourself. I don’t believe anyone currently living in this country is immune to overwhelm. We need practical, tactical tools to help us when we get overwhelmed, to get our life preservers back on, and to be able to keep our chin up above the waterline.

In hope research, the key points defining hope are: 1) the ability to imagine a goal for yourself; 2) the ability to visualize the pathways to get you there; and 3) the sense of wherewithal in yourself that you can do it. Clinically, one might call it “agency” or “self-efficacy.” I call it moxie, gumption, spirit, badassery in general. I’ve had the privilege of knowing a hope researcher named Dr. Chan Hellman, and he taught me, among many things, that “hope is a social gift” because we are each other’s pathways. *Naming and Taming Overwhelm* is just such a pathway. Take hope into your heart because you have a key in your hand right now. A key to unlock your life and those of the people you work with such that all can return to the joy and passion that got us here in the first place.

Thank you for all you do. You do it every day. Maybe take a few days off now and then, come

to think of it! You are making a better world. Don't forget to make sure it's better for you too. We love you at Healthy Gen. Think of this book and related tools as our love letter to you. Take a breath. Grab a cup of tea. Find a cozy nook with a snuggly blanket and open this book. You might want a pen handy to jot down your thoughts as they bubble up or write in the margins. I did. It's not going anywhere. You are not on a timer for this. Give yourself the gift of open time to read just the right amount for you at a time. Come back later and read a bit more. Or maybe, like me, you'll come back later and reread a compelling section. Share what you learn with others. Just like you already do. Everyday.

Love,
Melanie
Melanie Gillespie, Executive Director
Foundation for Healthy Generations
Seattle, Washington
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Being overwhelmed is like trying to play tennis with a broken arm or jog with a broken leg. If your arm was broken, we would put it in a cast and allow it time to be still and heal. The same thing is needed for a mind that is overwhelmed.

When someone is overwhelmed, they need help to rest their brain.

Resting the mind is a very tricky concept. First of all, your mind is always going. It is not something you can put in a cast and hold still. But if we don't let the mind take a break from solving problems, it can't recover. The effects of stress on the brain will just make all problem solving less and less possible.

Research on the brain shows the part of the brain affected by stress is the ventral medial prefrontal cortex.¹ This is the part of the brain where decision making takes place. Your entire philosophy of care needs to address the fact that when a person is under too much stress, they can't problem solve. Notice how difficult it is when you have personal problems going on at home and you are helping people with problems all day at work. You are vulnerable to mistakes, to burnout, and exhaustion when you are facing problems at work and at home.

Very few people understand what rest is or how to rest. You need to take the time to explain exactly what it means to stop problem solving and how to let the mind rest. Your explanation may be met with resistance.

"I can't rest, I can't even sleep at night."

"I don't have time to rest."

"Everything will fall apart if I rest."

When that occurs, help the overwhelmed person overcome their resistance and obstacles to resting in the context of their specific situation. I will honestly say it has taken weeks of repetition to help a client understand and integrate this concept.

Most people think if they just keep pushing onward, they will solve the problem and get past it. But that is not reality. The harder they push, the more stress they pile on and the more pressure they place on their mind and body. Ultimately, this will result in a longer recovery time, not a shorter one.

The goal is to stop the mind from problem solving. Let's return to the story about JC. JC's loss of her employment and healthcare coverage and the changes in her cancer treatment were overwhelming her. As her therapist, I discussed ways to take a short break from problem solving. Tackling problems from a mental state of overwhelm was not going to help her. The pressure to make choices and decisions while she was stressed was going to tax her brain further, and she would suffer more negative consequences. My goal was to help JC get her brain in a cast and to hold off on trying to solve her problems. During that time, she could practice resting and self-care.

Self-care is extremely hard to do when you are overwhelmed. It is important to ask your clients, "What do you do for self-care, nurturance, and enjoyment? At what point in the day or night can you do some self-care?"

Usually when I ask about self-care, overwhelmed people say, "What is that?" or, "I don't have time for that!"

When you hear that your client does not know what self-care is, notice your response. Do you feel inclined to make a joke? Do you silently blame them for their lack of self-care? Do you take it seriously that this is a critical skill for your client?

How effective are any of our strategies, interventions, or supports if a person is lacking self-care skills? When a person lacks self-care skills, you need to think in beginner steps. I call these easy on-ramps. All self-care skills can be thought of on a continuum. Self-care skills are learned; they are not automatic.

If you are working with an overwhelmed highly stressed person, you may think it makes sense to suggest they do some things for stress reduction. There is great research and incredibly effective strategies for stress reduction, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction, meditation, and journaling about feelings. However, there is a big glitch: all of these techniques take time to practice and take effect. People are often referred to try these things when they are at the peak of distress. Many will not follow up with yet another thing to do when they are overwhelmed. Others will try meditation, for example, and then report it didn't work. Stress reduction techniques won't work right away.

It is important to prepare people to understand that all stress reduction for the mind takes time to take effect.

Every person working in healthcare and human services needs to be trained in stress reduction and how it works. You will be explaining this to your clients many times, so you need to understand it and practice it yourself. Just as there are many opportunities to listen in healthcare and human services, there are many opportunities to take a few minutes to practice stress reduction with your clients.

Take a few minutes to do the stress reduction together.

Instead of problem solving, we are focusing our clients on resting the mind and learning stress reduction skills. These don't solve the problems, but they are meant to relieve the physical and mental stress on the overwhelmed person. It can be beneficial to do stress relieving activities when you are face-to-face with your clients. There are many easy stress busters you can do in just a few minutes with your clients. It does not take specialized training, and you are not going to hurt anyone by quietly taking a few minutes to breathe with someone or share some crayons and color.

Before we start, I typically say, "We just talked about some hard things. Let's take a few minutes and do a few minutes of stress reduction." Here are some of the stress relievers I do with clients:

- Three-minute meditations, where we sit with our eyes closed and breathe. Or I play a guided meditation from SoundsTrue.com that we follow. I also might read a meditation from Thich Nhat Hahn.
- Three-minute sound meditation using music for meditation
- Drawing an object that is in my office
- Coloring
- Vagus nerve stimulation. This nerve is in two-way communication with the brain. It touches every organ involved in an anxiety response. You can learn to make contact with this nerve by softening the hips and relaxing the sit bones and perineum in as short a time as two minutes.ⁱⁱ

I highly recommend that you learn and practice proven methods of relaxation to help people physically relax. While I wish everyone would follow up with a one-hour massage, attend a yoga class, or take the time for a walk outside, telling people to do these things is not always going to feel possible for someone who is overwhelmed. But you can begin by sharing a baby step, something doable.

Getting someone started is something you can do. Yes, I will color with a client in my office. Showing someone how three minutes of relaxation feels can create a possibility for them. I know it is effective when clients say, “I can do this!” or “I’m stopping to buy crayons on my way home.”

The goal is to get someone to do fifteen minutes of self-care each day. Frances Marcus Lewis, a University of Washington Professor of Nursing Leadership, has shown that if you can get someone to do fifteen minutes of self-care daily, they will expand the amount of time thereafter. You just have to get them to start doing the first fifteen minutes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Take time to reflect:

- What stress busters can you teach in under five minutes with your patients and clients?
- What resources for brief relaxation techniques can you give to your clients to take with them?

ⁱ “Prior studies have shown consistently that repeated and chronic stress causes great damage to neural structures, connections, and functions of the prefrontal cortex, the seat of higher order cognition that helps regulate emotions, and more primitive areas of the brain.” Yale Stress Center, Yale University (2016).

ⁱⁱ I learned this in a training led by Eric Gentry, Ph.D, International Association of Trauma Professionals.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lewis, Frances Marcus. “Caring for the Caregivers,” TEDxSnolsleLibraries. Published January 12, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duhJHedj82g>.