



# Overwhelmed at Work? Take Control

It is often said that a relationship is in trouble when a couple is no longer fighting because they have essentially given up. An issue that once might have provoked a heated exchange is handled with a shrug and a "whatever." This is the point at which the belief you can do something and it is worth your effort disappears - and with it your healthy coping responses. It's a useful analogy for describing how many people in the workplace are feeling today.

Consider the past few years: the Sept. 11 attacks and ensuing war on terrorism, West Nile virus, SARS, massive forest fires, power failures and mad-cow disease - the list goes on. We have been hit from all directions with an unremitting barrage of unthinkable events.

Add to this an uncertain economy, severe cost cutting, a general loss of workplace kindness, and a widespread loss of people's faith in the goodness of institutions in general and the trustworthiness of their employers in particular. Essentially, our collective psyche has been traumatized: we are suffering from a low-grade depression mixed with general anxiety about the way things are.

Depression is a state in which people feel helpless to control events, believe there is no relationship between what they do and what happens to them, feel bad things will continue to occur, and think about the future with pessimism. Depression has also been defined as anger turned inward.

Rather than getting angry at unreasonable employers who continue to turn the heat up even higher, many people become angry at themselves for putting up with unfair demands, thinking that if they were stronger they wouldn't put up with unfair treatment. People react differently to their feeling of vulnerability. Some put their desires on the back burner. Others, completely exhausted, abandon themselves. They may completely crack, or give up, seeking refuge in alcohol or drugs. Or they cast around for a safe secure haven or professional confidant.

Obviously, not everyone is defeated by the state of things. Some are galvanized, looking at these "bad" events as a cue to do something meaningful. These people would feel that they can't control what happens globally, but they can control how they manage their own world and well-being.

Are you suffering from a low-grade career malaise? Here is the test:

- ⇒ You are no longer engaged by your work
- ⇒ Things you used to care about no longer elicit any emotion.
- ⇒ You are frequently tired.
- ⇒ You find yourself frequently saying "whatever" and giving up on issues that once you would have been concerned about and lobbied to change.
- ⇒ You are not interested in or proud of what you do.
- ⇒ You flirt with idea of quitting but think: "It will be too much work to find something else." "Things will be no different." "Better the devil you know."

Your work plays a critical role in how you feel about your life. If any of the above statements describe how you are feeling, and you are not actively trying to change your situation or your feelings, you have sunk into career inertia. The way out of this is to take an activist stance:

Identify what is interfering with your experiences of engagement: Is it your work? Is it a sense of futility about global events that have coloured day-to-day feelings? Are you too overwhelmed by the number of things you have to attend to find the energy to take control and change your situation?

Pay attention to your feelings. If you feel "flat" or depressed, consider keeping a journal, and identify the high and low points of your day. What are the common themes? Monitor what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how you feel about it. Become vigilant to ensure you are investing in activities that are personally meaningful. Ask yourself: Am I simply going through the motions or do I really want to do this? How can I approach this task to make it more meaningful? If I were engaged or feeling confident, what would I be doing?

Be bold. Be prepared to take the tough moves. Introduce something new into your routine that would give you a sense of accomplishment, whether it is taking on a "stretch" assignment at work or starting an exercise program. Confront your inertia. If you don't want to do something because you haven't the energy, but intellectually you know you would feel good about yourself: do it. Make a commitment. Tell a friend. Ask them to monitor you.

*As the first century scholar Hillel wrote, in his famous three questions:*

*If I am not for myself, who is for me?*

*When I am for myself, what am I?*

*If not now, when?*

*Working with you for lasting change, Lynda Pedley*

Adapted from Barbara Moses