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# Autism World

Magazine

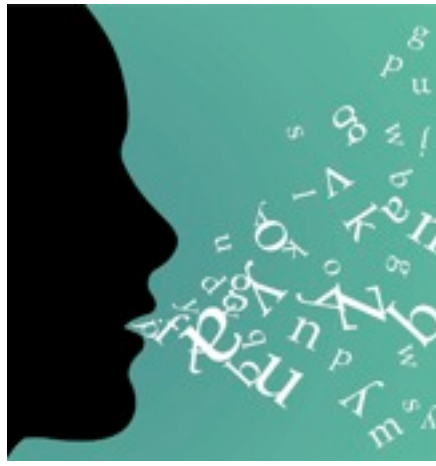
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# Future employment: part 2 Overwhelm



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Last month I explored two findings from an article posted on the News Medical website in September 2013<sup>2</sup>:

**young adults with autism spectrum disorders have worse employment outcomes in the first few years after high school than do peers who have [other types of disabilities](#) <sup>iii</sup>; and**

**young adults on the autism spectrum were less likely to have ever lived independently since leaving high school, compared to their [peers with other disabilities](#) <sup>iii</sup>**

In particular I suggested that the article failed to address the causes behind the above observations, which in my opinion included:

- Overwhelm;
- Fear of getting it wrong;
- Lack of self-belief;
- Society beliefs and perceptions about autism; and
- Lack of experience and training.

This month's 18+ article focusses on overwhelm, its causes and the impact that it has on individuals and on the people with whom the individual associates professionally or personally. Strategies will also be suggested to assist in successfully managing the overwhelm state.



Picture courtesy: Danny O'Connor  
<http://docart.bigcartel.com>

Firstly, overwhelm is a natural state designed to protect the body or the conscious mind, much akin to a pressure valve. In 1956, George A. Miller theorised that the conscious mind could only take in  $7 \pm 2$  pieces of information at one time before recall efficiency started to drop. There are many who believe that exceeding Miller's "Magic Number" will induce an overwhelm state commonly referred to as information overload.

Autistic individuals experience information overload more frequently and more intensely because of one key factor; they have difficulty breaking information down into chunks that meet the criteria of Miller's "Magic Number".

When a new topic is introduced, it has to be linked to pre-existing information to establish context and thus enable the autistic individual to effectively 'file' and cross reference the new information. If this cross-matching cannot occur because it does not fit any other information, then the autistic individual will attempt to open all of their files at once, like reading all of the books in a library at the same time. Overwhelm and meltdown occurs immediately.

Some keys for minimising information overload are:

- When teaching and instructing an autistic individual, it is important to address context first. Establish a point of reference that the individual can relate to and then link in the new information.
- Break the information into “chunks” that comply with Miller’s “Magic Number”;
- Trust the unconscious mind to ‘download’ and to ‘upload’ the information as required. The conscious mind overloads, not the unconscious mind. People can train both minds to communicate and interact more effectively.

Other forms of overwhelm include:

- Emotional overwhelm, which occurs when a person is consumed by one or more emotions and finds it difficult to break out of the state. This is often referred to as hysteria for extreme negative emotions and euphoria for extreme positive emotions.
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Keys to managing emotional overwhelm include learning how to manage your emotions through self-help groups, meditation, refocussing, etc.

- Environmental overwhelm, which takes place when the physical body succumbs to extreme external influences such as heat, cold, wind, rain, fire, radiation and the like.

The key to managing environmental overwhelm is to be aware of environmental factors and to plan accordingly to protect yourself from harsh conditions.

- Sensory overwhelm, where one or more senses are stimulated to such an extent that the individual will attempt to escape the overload. Most people will experience this type of overload when in environments that have excessive noise, bright lights, pungent scents, etc. People with sensory processing disorder can experience sensory overload in so-called normal environments.

Some keys for minimising sensory overwhelm are:

Mapping the individual’s hyper-sensitivities and preparing the area to be supportive of the individual’s sensory needs;

Exposing the individual to sensory input in a controlled and safe environment to desensitise his overwhelm to that sense;

Teaching the individual how to dissociate from the overpowering stimuli.

Overwhelm is stressful for both the person experiencing it and for the people witnessing the overload. Furthermore when one person has a meltdown triggered by overwhelm, there is a high risk that others in the area may themselves become overwhelmed.

"it is important to  
address context first"

The intention of an overwhelm state is to protect. If the individual feels safe, then his chances of overwhelming will be significantly reduced.

However, it is important for people to experience overwhelm in order for them to become more proficient and successful at living their lives. This is called 'expanding your comfort zone'.

You could become a hermit and live in a cave for the rest of your life, or you could get out and overwhelm yourself to such an extent that you no longer become overwhelmed. This is the path that I chose to travel and I have grown and succeeded so much as a result.

Part three of this series next month will address the fear of getting it wrong.



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**Malcolm Mayfield is co-author of  
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