

Stress Management

5 Ways to Focus Your Energy During a Work Crunch

by Amy Jen Su

September 22, 2017



Summary. Work invariably ebbs and flows, cycling between steady states, where we feel more in control of the pace and workload, and peak periods, where the work crunch hits us hard. Maintaining focus and managing energy levels become critical as tasks pile onto an... [more](#)

Work invariably ebbs and flows, cycling between steady states, where we feel more in control of the pace and workload, and peak periods, where the work crunch hits us hard. Unexpected setbacks, project sprints, or even vacations and holidays can create mayhem and tension. Maintaining focus and managing energy levels become critical as tasks pile onto an already full load. When you're in your next work crunch, there are a few things you can do to focus and manage your energy more productively:

Accept the situation. When an acute period hits, it's easy to resist the fact that it's happening. We wish for things to be like they were last month, or we long for the pace we had during vacation. By not being present to the here and now, we drain our energy by ruminating on the situation. In fact, physicists define resistance as “the degree to which a substance or device opposes the passage of an electrical current, causing energy dissipation.” In the case of a work crunch, the more you oppose what's happening, the more energy you lose. Acceptance does not mean giving in. On the contrary, it means acknowledging the reality of the situation with awareness so that you can take clear action.

Observe and label your underlying emotions. Acceptance is particularly difficult given the underlying emotions that an acute work crunch can bring. Negative thoughts such as *I'm not going to do a good job*, *I don't know if I'll be able to get it all done*, or *I feel like I'm dropping the ball at both home and work* often predominate. David Rock, director of the NeuroLeadership Institute, suggests in his book *Your Brain at Work* that, rather than suppressing or denying an emotion, an effective cognitive technique is labeling, whereby you take a situation and put a label on your emotions. “The most successful executives have

developed an ability to be in a state of high limbic system arousal and still remain calm,” Rock says. “Partly, this is their ability to label emotion states.”

YOU AND YOUR TEAM SERIES

Staying Focused



Your Brain Can Only Take So Much Focus

by Srini Pillay

The Two Things Killing Your Ability to Focus

by William Treseder

How to Stay Focused If You're Assigned to Multiple Projects at Once

by Heidi K. Gardner and Mark Mortensen

The next time you are in a tough work crunch, or you're experiencing a setback at work, take Rock's advice to step back, observe your thinking and emotional state, and assign a word to what's happening, such as "pressure," "guilt," or "worry." By using just one or two words, Rock's research shows, you can reduce the arousal of the limbic brain's fight-or-flight system and instead activate the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for our executive functioning skills.

Preserve your sense of choice and agency.

Accepting the situation and labeling our emotions can help to reduce the anxiety that comes with a work crunch. This is critical, because, as research out of the University of Pittsburgh shows, anxiety directly impacts our cognitive functioning, especially those areas responsible for making sound decisions. Don't fall into a victim mentality, believing there are no choices or that you don't have control. Instead, bring greater vigilance to assessing your priorities, making tough trade-offs, and incorporating self-care where you can. For example, ask yourself:

- What are the 1–2 things that are mission critical today?

- What is something I can do to recharge my battery (get to bed early one night this week, listen to my favorite music while working, or catch a nap on a plane)?
- Who or what will I have to say “no” to during this time?

Communicate with your colleagues and loved ones. Other people can be a real energy drain — or gain — during work crunches and set-backs. Pause and consider how you can renegotiate deadlines, set tighter boundaries, or ask for more support during this time:

- **Renegotiate deadlines.** Loop back with colleagues to ensure that you understand when the other person really needs something and is going to review it. In other cases, if you anticipate not being able to meet a deadline, be sure to inform your colleagues of the new timing or renegotiate it. Keep your integrity by doing what you say you’re going to do, and being up front about when you need to shift gears.
- **Set tighter boundaries.** Our boundaries and guardrails need to be different during work crunches or acute periods. Let others, both professionally and personally, know when you’ll be available or not, so they are aware of your more limited schedule.
- **Ask for help and support.** Many of us pride ourselves on not bothering others and being self-reliant. These are great qualities, but there are times when we need to ask for help. Ask your loved ones for more help on the home front. Share the weight of the accountability for projects with your colleagues by delegating or teaming up, versus doing it all on your own.

Practice self-compassion. Probably the toughest thing of all during a work crunch or setback is how easy it is to beat yourself up, especially when you aren’t hitting your high

standards for work or time at home. Annie McKee, author of the forthcoming book *How to Be Happy at Work* and coauthor of several books on emotional intelligence, says this about self-compassion: “If you really want to deal with stress, you’ve got to stop trying to be a hero and start caring for and about yourself.”

To be truly self-compassionate, especially during an acute period of work stress, accept the situation by acknowledging it with awareness and compassion, observe and label your emotions (don’t suppress or deny them), preserve your sense of choice and agency, communicate with your colleagues and loved ones, and ask for help when you need it. By taking these actions, you’ll move through your next crunch with greater ease and peace.

AS

Amy Jen Su is a co-founder and managing partner of Paravis Partners, a premier executive coaching and leadership development firm. For the past two decades, she has coached CEOs, executives, and rising stars in organizations. She is the author of the HBR Press book *The Leader You Want to Be: Five Essential Principles for Bringing Out Your Best Self—Every Day*, and co-author of *Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence* with Muriel Maignan Wilkins.