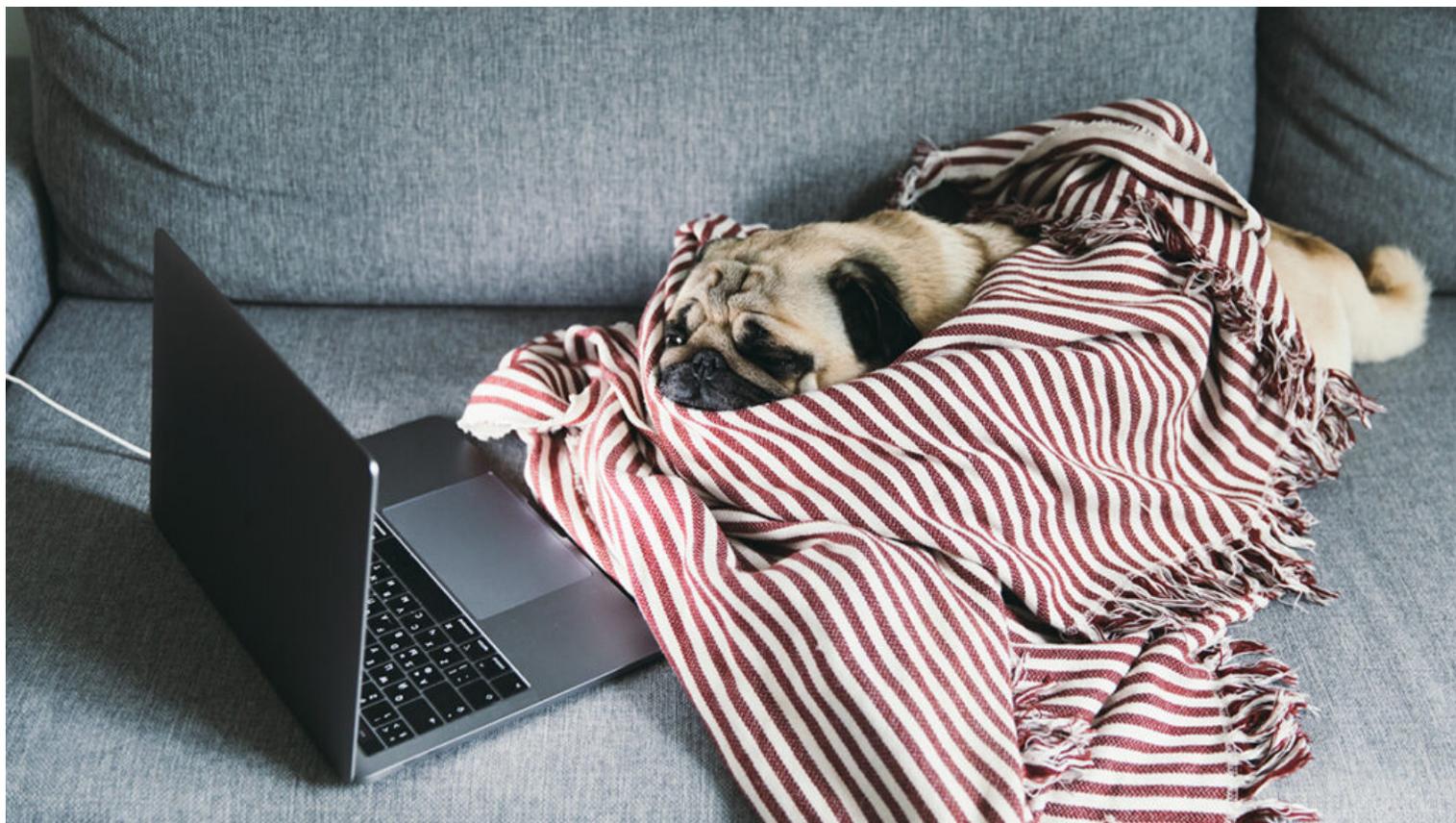


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Feeling Overwhelmed? Here's How to Get Through the Workday.

by [Alice Boyes](#)

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You know those days when it feels as though life is kicking you in the teeth? You get an unexpected bill for hundreds of dollars. You lose concentration and back into a parked car. You have a fight with your partner. You're called into preschool because your child has been misbehaving. A beloved relative keeps forwarding you conspiracy theories, and you can't take it anymore.

We all have those days. And yet we still need to get things done. Here are some tips for pushing through. When handled right, work can have a grounding effect that can help with whatever life is throwing at you.

Focus on a familiar activity.

Find a task on your to-do list that's satisfying but so familiar that it's not taxing — for example, writing the newsletter you've been putting together every month for years. Then do it.

Why does this help? When we perform highly familiar tasks, it's almost as though muscle memory kicks in. All the steps are so practiced that it's easy to get absorbed in them and to go with the flow. A task you can start and finish in one sitting will also give you a sense of accomplishment.

Tackle an unfamiliar task you've been avoiding.

This tip seems contradictory to the previous one, but it works through a different mechanism. Let me explain.

Yesterday I got some bad news. I threw myself into writing a couple of blog posts, as per the last tip. But then I did a task of the “work — but not really work” variety that I'd been putting off. Specifically, I needed to reread my last book to make sure I wasn't accidentally repeating any points or examples in my upcoming one.

Tasks that don't seem to justify a place in your usual workday — but that you struggle to do in your time off — can be a perfect choice on a low-vibe day. Doing something you've been avoiding will help you feel like a competent human whose life is on track.

You might also try things you'd typically overthink — for example, reaching out to a person in your field whom you'd love to work with but don't know personally — or a task that's aspirational and creative. Why not put together a talk or an article about why a way

of working that's standard in your industry is misguided, or make a prototype of that pet project you've had in mind? When people feel low, scared, or short on self-confidence, they tend to retreat. When you act as though you have confidence in your ideas and capacities, it provides an antidote to those feelings and can stop the negative spiral.

Do half your usual work.

When you're down, being productive can help with mood and resilience. Even for clinically depressed people, long leaves of absence from work are rarely recommended. But trying to perform to a high standard when you've taken an emotional hit can leave you so drained that you don't have the energy to process whatever is bothering you. You need some recovery to bounce back.

A good compromise is to do half (or two-thirds of) your usual work. A modest goal like this can prevent you from feeling overwhelmed and procrastinating. If you need to take a mental health day, take one and then resume, making use of the tips described here.

Connect with others.

Loneliness increases stress and reduces productivity. So don't be scared to be vulnerable with your coworkers; tell at least one person what you're going through. That will help them understand why you may be a bit less reliable or peppy than usual.

I've written before that our best sources of support during difficult times often aren't the people with whom we're closest. Our loose connections sometimes really step up if given a chance. And even small gestures of support from those weak ties can feel extremely helpful, because they're often unexpected.

This also means you can avoid oversharing with your family and best friends, which is especially important if those people have a lot going on themselves. And it often results in the weaker relationship growing stronger.

A caveat: Be sure to share with people you trust — who won't assume you'll be completely useless at work just because you're having some personal stress.

Drop your fear of negative emotions.

There's no need to worry that difficult emotions will destroy your productivity. In fact, work can be a refuge when you're in turmoil. I find that sad emotions enhance my creativity and productivity. Anger (especially at being underestimated) tends to make me feel more determined. Anxiety has a more mixed impact.

So although no one should act like a robot capable of soldiering on through any situation, don't assume that difficult emotions will negatively impact your work. The key is to use those feelings to propel you rather than try to sweep them under the rug.

When people are experiencing overwhelming, difficult emotions, their instinct may be to spend all day browsing the internet or to drown themselves in work as a distraction. But there are options between those extremes that can help you feel better, bounce back faster, and regain your confidence to handle whatever personal situations you're facing.

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