

SUMMARY

OVERWHELMED

BRIGID SCHULTE



Summary of “Overwhelmed” by Brigid Schulte

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Learn how to avoid drowning in an overwhelming world.

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Introduction

Do you ever feel like your life isn't your own? Or like you're constrained by the pressures of what other people expect you to do? For many people, this pressure is not only present, but so prevalent as to be life-altering. For example, mothers who choose to work outside the home often feel devalued by our society, ensnared by the double standard that criminalizes women who fail to stay home and raise children while glorifying men who are absent parents. Similarly, people who identify as non-binary-- meaning those who don't wish to conform to the performative standards of being either male or female-- also face discrimination.

And although we'd like to think that our society has come a long way since the repressive days of the nineteenth century, the author reveals that we're actually not quite as progressive as we think. Schulte believes that this lack of social enlightenment is responsible for a significant portion of our stress-- and it's not hard to see why! So, over the course of this summary, we're going to take a look at the negative impact of our society's outdated and conservative views and what we can do to mitigate that stress.



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Under Pressure

Remember that classic Queen hit, “Under Pressure?” If you’re a parent, there’s a good chance that you can relate to portions of the lyrics like:

“Pressure pushing down on me, pressing down on you, no man ask for/
Under pressure that burns a building down, splits a family in two/
Puts people on streets.”

In your experience, that pressure might manifest in the form of rushing home from work to pick the kids up from daycare and scrambling to craft a home-cooked meal while you hold the phone with one hand and your screaming baby with the other. And although you may not realize it, “everyday stress” scenarios like this one activate your body’s “fight or flight” response, flooding you with the same levels of adrenaline that would be produced if you were fleeing a serial killer or fighting off a bear. If we had encountered either of those scenarios, we would of course understand that our bodies have been traumatized and that we need time to recover. We would recognize our pounding hearts, throbbing temples, and shaky legs as cues that we had survived an ordeal and allow ourselves some time to rest. But when it comes to the “casual” stress of our daily lives, we simply suppress these signals and move on, burying our physical symptoms or telling ourselves that a glass of wine will do the trick.

But why do we do it? Why do we accept this stress? The author posits that we accept it because we have literally been conditioned to do so. We carry the expectations of our parents, who frequently reminded us that they had it much harder and that our generation is “weak.” And if you’re a woman, that stress is even more pronounced because of the social double standard that is placed upon you. In fact, when the Families and Work Institute surveyed working mothers with children under six to ask them about their happiness and quality of life, every single mother reported that she had not a single moment to herself. Not one moment where she wasn’t encumbered by the burdens of children, work, or household responsibilities.

Unsurprisingly, these women also reported stress levels that went through the roof!

The Institute conducted another survey of families later in 2008, incorporating the perspective of both mothers and fathers, and found that their results worsened. Half of the participants reported that they were severely overworked and burdened with more tasks than they could ever hope to accomplish in a standard workday. Similarly, 75% of participants affirmed that they lacked time to develop their relationship with their partners, and an even higher percentage asserted that they struggled to find time for their children. It doesn't take much to imagine how this pressure could quickly lead to dangerous stress levels and an influx of family problems. And in fact, for far too many Americans, it does. As the author acknowledges, studies show that long-term stress is not only detrimental, it literally changes our brains.

For example, a study conducted by Yale psychology professor Emily Ansell found that when she compared brain scans of people with relatively calm lives to those who were under constant stress, the prefrontal cortex of the stressed people-- which regulates our ability to plan ahead, make decisions, and think clearly under pressure-- had literally shrunk! Put simply, their exposure to constant stress had minimized their ability to cope with the stress of their daily lives. Even more concerning is the fact that the prefrontal cortex is also responsible for skills like self-control. And while our prefrontal cortex is being diminished, our amygdala-- the part of our brain which regulates emotions like fear, anxiety, or anger-- is actually increasing in the brains of people who are under constant stress.

So, as you can imagine, this results in a host of people who are anxious, unhappy, and overwhelmed struggling to control their responses to intense and negative emotions. Unsurprisingly, this could lead to a spike in violence or abuse towards others or self-destructive behaviors. None of these outcomes are positive and they're not what we want for our society! So, how can we combat the threat of stress? How can we live happier and healthier lives?



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Debunk Stereotypes

If you guessed that the title of this chapter is the author's answer to decreasing stress, you're absolutely right! Here's how it works: having acknowledged all the stress we mentioned in the previous chapter, let's consider what would happen if that stress was compounded by the additional pressure of discrimination. What if, no matter how hard you tried, and no matter how many other struggles you faced, people still acted like there was something wrong with you? What if everyone always acted like everything you do is wrong? How would that contribute to a person's stress levels? As you can imagine, this would have a significant and detrimental impact! And sadly, this reality is all too common for far too many people.

For example, as we mentioned earlier, working mothers are often stigmatized as not caring about their children. This stereotype is purely the result of their deviation from the model that characterized our parents' and grandparents' generation: the 1950's nuclear family which comprised a father who went to work and a mother whose sole focus was to take care of the home and children. Although it might be hard to imagine that we would genuinely care about outdated stereotypes in this modern day and age, people often care more than they should. And because people tend to automatically fear anything that challenges their conceptualization of "safe" or "familiar," harmful stereotypes and discrimination can arise. Similarly, men who choose to pursue traditionally "feminine" careers like a nurse, a dancer, or a fashion designer may be ridiculed for being overly feminine and therefore "suspicious" or "weird."

And although everyone who holds these views might not be blatant or outspoken in voicing them, their prejudice is still apparent in sideways glances, whispers behind someone's back, and the communication of the subtly passive-aggressive message: we think you're weird. Unsurprisingly, this can make a workplace very uncomfortable and generate significant

anxiety that many people carry home with them long after they're out of the stressful environment. But what about when it gets worse?

In many cases, this prejudice can even cost someone a job. For example, many working mothers face discrimination because prospective employers view them as being unreliable or overly emotional due to the “complicating factor” of their children. Those who do maintain successful jobs report discrimination which manifests in other forms, like being ridiculed for rushing home to spend time with their children or being passed over for big projects or promotions. On the flip side, men who take a very active role in their family lives are often discriminated against because they challenge the stereotype of the “ideal male worker.”

Because they're not content to dump the burdens of home and family on their partner, many employers feel threatened and find a way to avoid hiring them. This typically involves finding some excuse to say that this employee wouldn't be “dependable or focused enough.” And this only covers the heteronormative and cis-gendered side of the coin! When you add the complicating factors of sexuality and gender identity in the mix, you run into a host of well-known statistics which prove that people are routinely fired or not hired because they are gay or transgender. However, the good news is that we don't have to put up with this forever! And over the course of the next few chapters, we're going to learn what we can do to stop stress and discrimination.



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Be a Stigma Buster

You can think of a “stigma buster” as being like Ghostbusters, but more important. So, how can you be a stigma buster in your daily life? The author asserts that the first step is to start by seeking opportunities to dismantle stereotypes-- especially where that requires starting with yourself. We might not like to admit it-- and we might not even be aware of it-- but the truth is that gender stereotypes are to our society what water is to a fish. Because they are so deeply woven into the fabric of our society, they are deeply ingrained within us. And although you might be inclusive and open-minded towards others, the harmful and pervasive effects of gender stereotypes can often manifest in harsh self-directed criticism.

For example, if your parents always expected you to follow a traditional path-- marry a man, have children, and stay home with him-- you might sometimes feel weird or even guilty for being a lesbian who's chosen to avoid having children and concentrate on a successful career. Even though you know the truth-- that your identity is beautiful and valid and that there's nothing wrong with you-- you might sometimes feel like you've disappointed your parents or that you should have chosen something more conventional in order to make others happy. So, this is your first opportunity to start busting that stigma! You can start by reminding yourself that you're not the problem; harmful stereotypes are. It is not your job to make other people comfortable and you're not the one who needs to change. Instead, it's time that society evolves to be inclusive.

You can help others understand this by taking opportunities to educate where you can. For example, if someone makes the argument that gender stereotypes are based on biological factors, you can tactfully explain to them that humans have misinterpreted physiological differences to suit the social construct of gender. (This will also provide a perfect segue for explaining that gender is, first and foremost, a social construct!) People who identify as female may have traditionally cared for children, but that doesn't mean that either biology or history has sentenced them to do so

exclusively. Instead, this history is a result of less evolved societies forcibly regulating them to that role and using that as an excuse to engineer a self-fulfilling prophecy! And because gender is entirely performative-- and something we've made up-- it's not a sound logical basis for making decisions about others. Denying someone a job because they fail to align with our made-up concept of what a person should look like isn't just outdated-- it's nonsensical!

So, don't hesitate to clear up these misconceptions wherever you can. It may also help to consider examples which prove that change is absolutely possible. For example, women gained the right to vote because protests, education, and an increase in raising awareness changed social perceptions. What was one considered unthinkable is now a basic human right, as it should have been all along! The same is true for other examples, like women attending higher education, women serving in the police force and military, and working outside the home. Although each of these examples of social reform were far too long in coming, the important thing is that change did occur. And just as we've achieved reform in these areas, altering society's perception of what's "normal," the message of hope is that we can continue to do so.

The United States has a lot of catching up to do, but the examples of Scandinavian countries like Denmark prove that an egalitarian society is indeed possible. In fact, Denmark is not only known for its incredible progress in gender equality, it is also known as the world's happiest country! And its national policies directly address the sources of stress we've discussed in previous chapters. For example, in Denmark, one year of paid leave is mandatory for both mothers and fathers after the birth of a child!

Employers are also required to provide high standards of childcare for working parents and companies are limited on the maximum amount of hours employees can work. This is a government-mandated policy designed to insure that employees are able to have some free time, recharge and relax, and enjoy time with their families!

These standards have also led to an increase in equal distribution of household chores, meaning that men and women share domestic responsibilities equally. And-- unsurprisingly-- this has resulted in 60% of Danish men reporting higher levels of happiness! Rather than seeking to put more responsibilities on their female partners, the majority of Danish men feel better about themselves and their relationships when they know their relationships are founded on mutual respect and equality. As we consider these social policies, it's easy to conceptualize Denmark as an unrealistic utopia, but the truth is that Denmark stands as a shining example of the positive change that is possible.



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Final Summary

It's no secret that our lives are often characterized by stress. But most of the time, that stress has been placed upon us by others like our employers, our families, or the court of public opinion. The stress of our hectic and overscheduled lives is also compounded by negative and harmful stereotypes, especially those which relate to gender roles. These stereotypes can result in prejudice, discrimination, or even the loss of one's job. And, unsurprisingly, these factors can increase the stress and anxiety that we carry with us when we go home.

To reduce this stress and improve our quality of life, the author argues that we must work to dismantle toxic gender stereotypes and work towards a more egalitarian society. As society becomes more accepting and inclusive, Schulte posits that we will therefore be happier and more stress-free.



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