



On the Job: Prioritizing is key when change is overwhelming

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You're juggling five different projects at work, and three of them are undergoing major revisions. The boss has just informed you that a new software system (the third in two years) will be installed in two weeks. You need to attend training classes, but you worry how you will schedule it because your mother's health is declining and she needs more help at night. And, you just got word that your youngest child is failing math.

Welcome to the American dream. Many of us today face such stresses on a daily basis.

"There absolutely are more changes in our lives than ever before," says Noelle Nelson, a California-based clinical psychologist and business consultant. "But the human race continually expands and we can learn to cope with it."

For example, Nelson says that while those in the 1800s couldn't begin to cope with driving a car, talking on the phone, eating a protein bar and tuning the radio at the same time, many Americans do it without thinking twice. She says that's because the human brain has the ability to find ways of handling what is demanded of it, and today's stresses eventually will be handled without a lot of fuss. But until our brains completely grasp what is needed, we're likely to feel the stress, she says.

"The key for people now is prioritizing," she says.

For example, if someone has a lot of tasks at work, the key is determining "which has the hottest fire under it and dealing with that first."

Nelson advises spending only 30 minutes to an hour on that task, then moving on "to the next hottest item."

Another key, Nelson says, is that instead of looking at any new change with resentment, view it from the perspective of "maybe."

"Maybe the boss gave you that job because he believes you to be more capable than you think you are," Nelson suggests. "Or, maybe the new software system will be better and save more time."

At the same time, Nelson says that as many people struggle with trying to handle multiple changes, there are some strategies they can use to cope, such as:

* **Make a list.** "Part of feeling overwhelmed is that you keep thinking about the problem over and over," she says. "Once you write it down, then you can begin to also write down solutions and who you can ask for help."

* **Be creative.** When you're thinking of ideas to help you cope with a change, don't rule anything out. Maybe you can ask a colleague to take work from someone else, so that person can help you with your tasks that need immediate attention. You won't know until you try. Or, maybe a neighbor can be asked to look in on your mother every evening to make sure things are OK. "Most of us have not been brought up to ask for help. We try to do it all. But you'll be surprised that when you ask for help, you can sometimes get just what you need, or at least something that will relieve some of the pressure."

* **Take a deep breath.** Anger is often the first reaction when we learn of a change. Instead, take a deep breath and ask: "What possible advantage or benefit could there be for me in this change?" Maybe the new software system will make you more marketable, or the training will expose you to other people in the company you'd like to meet.

* **Know yourself.** When you're deciding how to cope with changes in your life, don't be afraid to draw a line in the sand. Don't let things interfere with what keeps you healthy, wealthy and well, Nelson says. It may be that you must get eight hours of sleep a night, or that you must spend an hour a day with your spouse. "They're what you need to maintain yourself," Nelson says. (For other coping strategies, join the blog discussion at www.anitabruzzo.com).

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