

Podcast Episode #017

An Instructive and Timely Conversation About Overwhelm with special guest Brigid Schulte

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Announcer: Welcome to the LiftOff Project with Coach Pamela.

Pamela: Welcome to the LiftOff Project. I'm Pamela Mitchell, your host and your coach, and this is the podcast devoted to helping you meld your professional self and your personal self into an enhanced version of your best self. My goal is to help you take control of your work and your life, feel more relaxed and confident, and experience the satisfaction and fulfillment of a sustainable, successful life.

Today we are having a conversation about overwhelm. Such an incredible topic, and to help me to talk about this I spoke with Brigid Schulte. Brigid is the author of the book called *Overwhelmed*, so yes, she is the expert on this. Her book *Overwhelmed: Work, Love and Play When No One Has the Time* was named one of the Washington Post's notable non-fiction books of the year, so it's an incredible treatise on how we have gotten to this space of being overwhelmed in our world and offers some very practical advice about how we can work through it.

She's also the director of the Better Life Lab at New America, which is a non-partisan think-tank working on work, life, and gender equity. Brigid had a lot of really great insights and advice for us today. In fact, it's a longer interview because she had so much good stuff to say I just kept talking, or I should say we both kept talking! We had a great conversation. Let's get this show started!

Hi Brigid, thanks so much for joining us today.

Brigid: Oh thank you so much for having me! It's great to be here Pamela.

Pamela: As I was just saying before we hopped on this call, I am such a fan girl of your book. Oh my gosh, I mean even just the title *Overwhelmed*, it hit me in my heart. What I love about your book so much is that it is this blend of real deep research about the policies, the cultural attitudes, and the technological changes that have led to our current state that we're experiencing in the world around being overwhelmed. But it's also your emotional journey and the blend of the two where you started with this question and you



went on a quest to solve this problem for yourself is so powerful. Why don't we begin by explaining what I found to be such an incredibly powerful concept, which is this one of "time confetti" and how you started on your journey because of "time confetti."

Brigid: Yes, and I have to say the journey continues. I've learned a lot and that's probably ... I'm jumping ahead of myself here but they'll ask me, "Well, what's changed most in your life?" or "Do you have it all figured out now?" To me the most important thing is to recognize that it is a journey and that it's a practice and what's really different is that through the process of reporting, I guess when I began the book I didn't think things could change and I didn't even question it. I figured it's overwhelming and it's crazy and this is the way it has to be. That's probably the most powerful thing, even when I do stupid things and I stay up all night cleaning out my email inbox which I did recently. I have to admit, I still do stupid things, I still fall into bad habits, but what's different is I've seen how it can be different. I'm much more familiar with all of the research about how it really should be different, how it could be better, and so I have hope and I keep going.

I think that's what's different. When I began this book and I began this journey I felt completely hopeless and I felt that my life was out of control. I had two little kids, was married, I was working full-time, I was working as a reporter at the Washington Post which is a very high pressure, demanding job. They value long hours and certainly a lot of productivity and it was sort of too much and I was afraid to leave the job even though, believe me, there were times that I would look longingly at a UPS truck driver. Oh boy, they just work their hours and then they're done, wouldn't that be awesome? It felt like my job never turned off, but at the same time I'm a writer and I loved what I was doing and I was really afraid that if I jumped off the steep and narrow ladder of this career trajectory that I would never get back on and my life would be over.

I felt really trapped and felt that there were really no other options. At the same time, we lived in the Washington, DC area and it's expensive! It really required both of our salaries to pay for our mortgage. My husband's also a journalist, it's not like we're making the Wall Street bucks and we made that choice because we do what we like or because it's interesting, because we feel passionate about it and we made that choice that that was more important to us. There were plenty of times I felt really guilty. It's like "Oh I should be home with my children, I'm a terrible mother" so it's just feeling polluted with guilt and overwhelmed. At the same time my husband and I had promised to be these equal partners and what I didn't even realize is how it was laughable, how we had fallen into unbelievably traditional gender roles and I was doing everything and I was really resentful all the time.

Again, I didn't think it could change and everybody else I talked to, everybody else was overwhelmed, everybody else's work was unforgiving, didn't even matter what type of job it was. One friend really wanted to have a big family because she came from a small family and when she had her fourth child she wanted to work part-time for a couple years. She was great at her job, but her company said no and she quit. And she's not been back to work since. I saw all of these doors slamming for women in this position



who wanted to do something different and the work culture didn't allow for it. Again, I thought, "Well this is the way it is and I've made this choice to be a working mother and life is hard and it sucks and that's the way it is."

In the middle of all of that, I was working on a project at the Washington Post and we were looking at women and time and figuring we wanted to get some data to show how busy women were. They were having a hard time reading the newspaper and the editors and the bosses at the Post wanted to figure out, "Well, why aren't women reading the newspaper?" We thought, "Well, women are busy!" and so I volunteered to get the data to show that and I called up a time-use researcher. I didn't even know that such a thing existed and he immediately said, "No, women aren't busy. Women have 30 hours of leisure a week. Women have more leisure time now than they did in the 1960's even though more of them work in the marketplace."

It was one of those moments that I can't even really describe how I felt. It was partly angry; I was like, "Are you kidding me?" Then it was partly disgust: here is another authority figure who publishes books and writes articles and then we pick it up in the newspaper and then we continue on this, what felt to me, this really false narrative. Women have plenty of time, if you're feeling overwhelmed it's just your fault and there's something wrong with you. That's pretty much what this guy told me. I said, "You're crazy, I don't have 30 hours of leisure." He said, "Yes you do, come and do a time study and I will show you where your leisure is." I was angry and I took him up on this challenge but at the same time all of those feelings of anger and frustration and disgust and also, I have to be perfectly honest, real fear because what if he was right and I did have this time? What if it really was all my fault and I was wasting my life? I was terrified to find that out.

That's really what started this whole journey: the quest for this elusive 30 hours of leisure. Very briefly, what I'll say is that I did do the time study and he did analyze my journal, my time diary, and he found 27 hours of what he called leisure and I looked at it and that was my time confetti. It was bits and scraps of really what I called garbage time, the in between time. Lying in bed, trying to get out of bed, listening to NPR. And he's like, "Listening to the radio is leisure time."

Pamela: You're like, "I'm so exhausted I can't even get out of bed. How can that be leisure?"

Brigid: Right, are you kidding me? There was one time I took my daughter to a ballet class and my station wagon broke down on the side of the road. We waited for a tow truck for two hours and he called that leisure time. I'm like, "Are you out of your mind?" At the time, I was reading a lot about leisure and I was reading the ancient Greek philosophers and Aristotle would say we work to have leisure upon which happiness is based. I thought, "Wow, if that's my leisure time, what does that say about my life?" I felt really bad, I felt really alone, and I felt like this is all my fault and there was something wrong with me and that everybody else had it figured out.



I wrote a magazine story for the Washington Post and left it there like, "Well, you said I had leisure, this is what he came up with, doesn't this suck?" And I was surprised. I got such an outpouring of response, because again, I felt so alone. But it was both men and women. It wasn't just mothers and it wasn't just working mothers, it was people with kids and without kids, it was old people, it was young people, and so many of them said, "You climbed into my head and you wrote about my life." That was a huge revelation to me to realize, "Wow, it's not just me and a lot of people are feeling like this and we don't feel like we can talk about it. We're all sort of putting on a brave show, what's going on?"

At that point some agents were contacting me and they said, "Do you want to write a book?" I thought, "Well, I do want to write a book but I don't know if I want to write about this," because again, I didn't know if it could change, I didn't know if there was anything more to say about it. I took a year to really think about it, what would I really want to know if I really pursued this? I was having coffee with a friend who had also written a book and he said that he had two questions that he wanted to pursue and he said, "Why are things the way they are and how can they be better?" And I said, "Oh Larry, I'm stealing that, that's awesome, that is exactly what I want to know." You can see in my book I totally give him credit for that. That really helped inform my journey, that's what I want to know. Why are things the way they are, why does it feel so overwhelming, but more importantly, how can they be better?

I love Oprah. I love all the magazines that say 10 ways to do this and 7 ways to clean your closet and 10 ways to be happier. I love it, I buy them, often it's great advice, but if it were easy we'd do it all. I wanted to know really "how do you get there" and "is anybody doing it better" and really use my skills as a journalist and investigative reporter. That's really what the book is all about.

Pamela: I mean, there's so many layers in there that I want to unpack, first of all, how we ended up in this spot and why we are all feeling this way? That piece was really enlightening to me because I didn't realize how much these archetypes, the ideal worker, the ideal mother, played into what's going on in our heads and also this whole piece around being busy as a status symbol. Maybe you can talk about those concepts because that really hit me like, "You know what, she's right, I do that!" I'm like, "Oh my God. I'm so busy, I'm too busy to talk to you, my friend" and what is that saying?

Brigid: I know! I was totally caught up in it, so I think maybe that's one of the things about my book that's a very compassionate. A lot of books aren't and they're like, "Just get your act together and you're an idiot and you should do it differently." I got so caught up in it and we all get caught up in it. What's different here is really wanting to understand but from a place of compassion. I don't think we choose to be overwhelmed. We fall into it and don't really understand why and that's a big part of the book: helping to bring awareness so that we can make different choices. In a sense yes, I guess overwhelmed is a choice but first you have to understand where it's coming from. Then it gives you enough information to begin to make different choices because right now, if you don't really understand it, you don't feel like there are choices and that's how I felt.



It was a huge shock to me, but I had totally bought into the concept of the ideal worker; that the more you worked the better you worked and the harder you worked then the more you would rise, the more you were valued. I just worked like a maniac, but I have to tell you I was just thinking about that this morning. I did a lot of the urgent stuff. I thought, "If I do this I'll get this out of the way and then I'll get to the bigger thing. I'll do this and I'll finish the story and then I'll get to the bigger project, and I'll do this and I'll finish this and I'll get to the bigger project." I worked for nearly 25 years like that and I would occasionally get to the bigger project.

People talk about the big rocks in your life or the big things that are important that take time and effort. Then there's all sorts of the little pebbles that get in the way and I spent a lot of my time on the pebbles rather than on the big things. Because when we get overwhelmed and busy and we're focused on all of that work all the time and you're tired, you do the pebbles first and then the time is gone. You don't have time for the big stuff. That's certainly something I'm still struggling with. That's one thing that our workplaces don't make it easy to do, which is to do the big, important work. We're all focused on the little urgent things.

So again, the ideal worker concept is very powerful and what was really fascinating and eye opening to me is all of this emerging research that shows that that's not really the best way to do work. The little pebbles are just one example of getting mindless, getting so busy you don't even begin to get your priorities straight.

The neuroscience shows that if you want to be creative and innovative, you really need time off and away from work, away from constantly "being on" and checking your emails. Your brain thinks in two functions. This is what neuroscience is finding. We have this focused mode where you're at your desk and you're working and you're checking your emails and you're vigilant, and then you have this diffuse mode which is more day dreamy and spacey and you're going for a walk and you let your mind wander. We tend to think that that's a waste of time but it turns out that's a critical time for your brain wiring. That's when you're going to get a fresh idea.

The more you can build that into your day and into your workplaces, the better work you're going to do. That was fascinating, that totally blew my mind and I was really fascinated to see that the ideal mother is so powerful still. We tend to think, "Well, wait a minute, women have been working since the early 70s and haven't we figured it all out?" And we really haven't. If you look at the general social survey or even the Pew Research Center, we're really ambivalent about whether we think mothers, particularly of young kids, should work. It's like we haven't figured that out. We're still queasy about it and so if we're not sure that that's a good thing then why should we have policies that make it easier? Why should we have workplaces that are flexible for everybody? We do not make it easy for mothers to work in this country. We don't make it easy for parents to work and live, and I didn't realize that.

We basically have structures that very much reinforce the ideal worker who's a man, who goes to work and works all the time and who has somebody else at home taking



care of everything else. Except we don't. The writer Katrina Alcorn put it best. She said, "We're expected to work as if we don't have families and we're expected to have families as if we didn't work." It's a complete and utter perfect storm of a disaster. Some of this is our cultural attitudes and our discomfort with reality. A lot of it is our policies and our social structures that haven't caught up with how we really live.

Pamela: Men and women are locked into this too because that was some of the things that I saw in your book too. Men were really locked into having to be that ideal worker from a man's perspective. Women had to deal with this whole ideal mother guilt piece and then men had to deal with this whole, "Well, if I want to spend time with my kids, I've got to feel guilty."

Brigid: Yes, and it traps both men and women into these really outdated roles. It polices them back into those roles, if you will. It's really interesting. In our work cultures it's like if a guy's going to coach his son's little league team it's like, "Oh, what a great dad!" and he can do it occasionally. Then if a dad says, "Listen, I do the childcare pickup every Tuesday and Thursday" that dad is typically ostracized or penalized or stigmatized. "Don't you have a wife for that?" We still don't have that sense that men and women have children, men and women raise families, or men and men, or women and women, or there are single parents. Then we don't give our caregivers support because men and women are also more and more needing to take mom or dad to the doctor, or to their chemotherapy appointment, or to chase after them when they've run out of the nursing home with their Alzheimer's.

We've got elder caregiving responsibilities too and so I did go out and I found some really interesting work environments, work cultures that recognize that to do your best work you need authentic workers and authentic workers have work and life.

Pamela: Yes, and that was so powerful when I read the stories of those particular work cultures and I was like, "You know that's great!" And that's one whole aspect because to your point about "what can society do" and then "what can we do," we can advocate for those changes. However, there's also a personal piece because until that happens, it's going to take some time for our society to catch up to where we really are. So what can we do to bring ourselves personal agency in all of this?

Brigid: Right. I have a whole chapter there. I call it my Personal Mastery chapter because I got to the same point. It's like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. We need new policies, we need to change work culture, what do I do today so I can stop feeling so crazy?" I had that same feeling and really that's why I talk about change on two levels in the book. Personal mastery is putting on your own oxygen mask and the more we put on our own oxygen masks, then the more we'll be able to work together to make that bigger change.

The very first one is a pretty easy one and that is to recognize that we have, just as you said earlier, made busyness a status symbol. We don't value time off. The Greeks said that true leisure was that place where you refresh your soul. Well, you know what, that's just the point of a good life. We're not all about work, we're not widgets. We're in a very



crazy, overworked, exultation time and so the first thing is being aware of that, to see it and then to recognize that we do feel like busyness is a badge of honor and that is the way we show our status and fit in. If that's not what you want, decide that. So now I really watch my language.

The second thing is awareness. We need to see the water we're swimming in, recognize that it doesn't have to be the water we swim in, that there is a different way of doing it. Look for those stories and go to the light, look for the light, but then when people ask you, "How are you doing?" Don't automatically say, "Oh fried, so busy!" You might feel that way but that then perpetuates that sense of status. What I try to do is say, "I'm great!" and then if what you're doing comes up in conversation then it comes up in conversation. Disrupt that cycle of busyness, that automatic, "Oh, I've got so much to do." When it comes to your to-do list, I used to think I had to get to the end of the to-do list before I got to do anything fun or big, kind of that same sense of getting the pebbles out of the way and then you could do the big rock of fun.

Put that rock smack at the top of your to-do list. At work, make time first thing in the morning to do that big, juicy, maybe hard-to-get to project. Turn off your email, turn off your phone, let people know you're not available for the first 90 minutes of your day, and do that big thing, do it first. Same thing with joy, with fun. Put that on your to-do list, make time for it. We really could make time for 30 minutes or even an hour of doing something fun a week. You really can. You can find that time, put it on there, schedule it, give yourself permission. That's particularly for women.

There's really interesting research that shows that women feel that they don't deserve this kind of time, that they have to earn it and the only way to earn it is to get through all of their work and their to-do list. But let's face it: it never ends.

Pamela: One thing you said in your book that really struck me, were two things. One, that women historically did not have leisure, our leisure was work.

Brigid: Right, that's the other thing to remember. Women have never had a history or culture of leisure. The "good woman" was always bustling around and busy. Think of even the TV shows you watched. It was always the guy or the granddad who was sitting around with his feet up or reading the newspaper and the woman, the mom, the grand mom is always running around and cooking something or ironing something or fixing something. Remember that there's never been a history of culture of leisure for women. We tend to feel guilty if we take it or selfish and it's really not. It's that our roles are changing and we can still be caregivers, we just have to put ourselves in the equation as well. Refreshing your soul is just being human, so allow yourself to be human, give yourself that time. It's not like you're going to go eat bon-bons all day and neglect your family duties. It's actually going to help you do them better.

Pamela: Some other things that you found in your own personal plan were 90-minute cycles of working and then also using, you call it in your book, writing down this list, this endless to-do list. I call it the parking lot where you park all those things that you intend



to get to at some point. Talk about how you incorporated those strategies to help you create this space away from overwhelm.

Brigid: That's really, really important. I used to call it the tyranny of the to-do list and I'd have this gigantic long to-do list and it weighed on me so heavily. I was reading a lot of different time management books and different strategies and it really comes down to some pretty simple things, things that my kids learned in preschool. Plan, do, review. So take some time to really plan. What are your priorities, what do you really need, what do you feel like doing? Do it and then review. How did it go? Did it feel good? What could you do differently? Think of all of this as an experiment.

I love the research that shows, just like we sleep in 90 minute cycles at night, the REM cycles, we have 90 minute ultrafine cycles during the day of attentiveness. Really use those, there's really great research on virtuoso's that shows they practice first thing in the morning really intensely, they've got it worked out so that they don't have to make a decision, it's just habit, it's routine. Then they work for no more than 90 minutes and then they take a break. I really try to incorporate that as I wrote my book. I did, I wrote it in 30, 45, and 90 minute cycles. And then sometimes I would get into the flow, which was awesome, and then I'd be gone for a while, and oh, time for a break, maybe for a walk.

I really do incorporate breaks into my day now. Sometimes it's a little bit more difficult. I'm now at New America and I'm directing the Better Life Lab which is really exciting. I get to come to work every day and work on these issues to try to make it better. Working on the big structural stuff for all of us is exciting. It's a pretty new position for me so I'm still experimenting with how to use my time here. That's the other thing to remember. Life changes, so adapt and once you have a schedule or a system and you feel like, "Oh, I've got it all figured out, it's locked in," it's going to change. It'll change before you know it and so recognize that and give yourself that flexibility to adapt. I think that's really important.

Permission is huge. Recognizing that you're going to do better work, you're going to be better if you also take care of yourself. That's a really important message for women.

Pamela: Perfect, thank you so much, Brigid, for coming on the show today and sharing all of that really smart advice and the honesty of your story. It's so incredibly powerful and I know our listeners are going to get a lot of value out of hearing your journey.

Brigid: Thank you so much for having me! Like I say, I'm at the Better Life Lab at New America, so I'm working on these issues. I'd love to hear from people, too. Give us your ideas, sign up for our newsletter, be part of the tribe. We're really working to make change so that our sons and daughters will have different choices, real choices without penalty.

Pamela: Great work indeed. Thanks so much!

Brigid: Thank you!



Pamela: Wasn't that a great interview? I loved all the insights that Brigid had to share. If you haven't already read her book, I highly recommend checking it out. Again, it's called *Overwhelmed: Work, Love and Play When No One Has the Time*. If you're interested in learning more about her work at the Better Life Lab, they are building a tribe of people who are interested in policy solutions that better fit the way that people and families work and live to enable all people to thrive, so check it out at newamerica.org.

That's it for this segment of the LiftOff Project. Be sure to visit our website theliftoffproject.com/podcast where you can download a transcript of today's episode. If you have a question for an upcoming segment of Ask Coach Pamela, go to theliftoffproject.com/question and leave me a voicemail. If I answer your question in a future episode, I'll send you a free deck of reinvention cards as a gift, so leave me a voicemail! You can also connect with me on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @thecoachpamela. And if you enjoyed this episode, please leave a review for us on iTunes, your feedback truly does make a difference.

Today's LiftOff inspiration comes from Bruce Lee who says, "It is not a daily increase, but a daily decrease. Hack away at the inessentials." Sounds like a great recipe for reducing overwhelm. Thank you for listening today and remember, why settle for good when great is waiting? Take one small step this week to lift your life. Bye for now.

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