

Ten Truths for the Overwhelmed Student



I hear you're feeling a bit overwhelmed with school - and maybe with life, too. Fortunately, I'm old and wise; perhaps I can help.

Normally I'd start by asking you what's on your mind, or what you think is causing your difficulties. Being as how this is an article you're reading from some website you've never heard of, and thus a bit... one-directional, I'll just skip to the wisdom and insight. It applies most of the time anyway.

Ready...?

One. You have GOT to BREATHE.

Long and deep, in through the nose... out through the mouth - good. A few more times...

No, don't just read on - this stuff doesn't work if you don't do it. DO THE BREATHING, then listen to me.

Two. You're not stupid.

I don't know if you're a genius or not, but genius isn't necessary here. I assure you, if you were stupid, your teacher would be nicer to you. He or she would have called you aside long ago and had a conversation something like this:

"Hey, um... Marcia. Look, I have some bad news. You're too stupid for this class. It's OK - it's not your fault, probably some combination of genetics and upbringing. BUT, we're gonna need to get you into a slow kids class, OK?"

If that didn't happen, you're good.

Besides, here's the crazy thing - feeling stupid usually indicates that you're not.

There are studies and science for this, but if you were great at researching stuff we wouldn't be having this conversation, so I'll skip them. The short version is that smart people are far more aware of how much they



don't know and can't do; ignorant people feel pretty good about their insights and expertise in every possible area. Sometimes they even win high political office on moxy alone.

Another part of the issue is that you're one of the "good kids." You mostly hang out with other "good kids," so brilliant seems normal and above average seems dumb. In any NBA locker room, there's one guy who's shorter than the rest of the team. They're all 6'8" or 7'2" or whatever, and he's 6'4" - still freakishly tall, but perpetually feeling like a midget. You're not a midget - you just have good taste in friends.

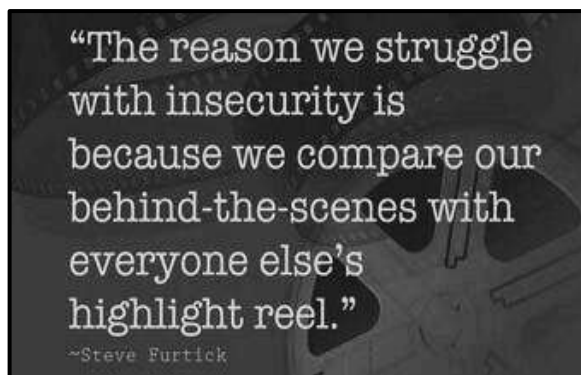
So do they, by the way.



Three. *You're not alone.*

Sure, there are a number of your peers for whom school is much easier than it is for you. That's OK – everyone's different. Most of the folks around you, though, are just putting up a good front – many just as panicked as you.

I know because I've had this same conversation often enough to make composing this list seem like a pretty good idea. It's time-consuming to craft all of this witty commentary and insight. You may have noticed the pithy visuals as well. No offense, but I wouldn't do this for *just you*. Too much work.



Four. *Shut yourself up.*

I suppose you could take this literally, as in "find a quiet place" – which is also good advice. But here I mean inner-dialogue-wise.



Remember the old cartoons with the AngelYou and the DevilYou on opposite shoulders? Contrary to what you might think, DevilYou isn't primarily focused on trying to get you to rob banks or do crack. Those aren't legitimate temptations for you – you're a "good kid," remember?

It IS, however, willing to maintain a constant stream of deprecation and frustration, running in the background of everything you think, feel, say, or do. Details vary with personal insecurities, but whether it's despair, rage, detached cynicism, or simple self-doubt, it usually begins with tearing off little strips of you and pretending that's the cost of being "honest" with yourself.

It's lying to you.

You can't kill it or completely mute it – it's *you*, after all – but you can recognize it and turn it down. Assign AngelYou to keep it in check. Quietly if possible, but out loud if necessary. Seriously – talk to yourself, realistically but positively. It's good for you.

You can be honest about your strengths and weaknesses without so much self-loathing. I promise.

Five. *Get a planner or agenda of some sort.*

Mundane, right?

They work, but you have to use them. Starting TODAY, every hour, jot down what you did in class and what's assigned and when it's due. I know you think you'll remember, but we're having this conversation, so obviously...

Set your phone alarm to remind you at least twice each day – once around the time you get home from school and once several hours before you go to bed – to look at your planner. Read through it even if you don't stop and do everything right then.



Anything that doesn't get done gets copied onto the next day, and so on, until you do it. Continue this system even when you don't think you need to – new habits take time.



Six. Choose a few things that won't take long, do them, and cross them off.

If you do something that needs doing but wasn't on the list, write it down, then cross it off. I realize it might sound silly, but - just trust me on this. It's a "track record of success" thing. And it helps.

This next one is huge. Are you still with me?

Seven. When you're doing a thing, do that thing.

If you decide to read an assigned book for twenty minutes, set aside that voice panicking about chemistry homework. While you're doing your math, stop getting on your phone to "collaborate" on that English project. *Pick something, and do it.* No second-guessing.

One task at a time. That's the most you can do, ever.

It's easy to run from worry to worry until you end up exhausted and frustrated without actually getting much done. One of the greatest hindrances to completing anything is worrying about all the other stuff you suddenly fear you should be doing instead.

That's a trap and a lie. Shut it off and choose something – right or wrong. Do it exclusively, and as well as possible.



Eight. When you're working, work.

When you're reading, *read*.

When you're thinking, *think*.

Put the phone far, far away. Whatever amazing things unfold in the 20 minutes it takes to finish your calculus will still be there waiting for you when you take a break.

When you're taking a break, *take a break*. Set a time limit and don't keep finding reasons to go past it, but don't keep worrying about what you're not getting done.

And move around a little – it's good for you emotionally and mentally as much as physically.

Side Note: *Social power never comes from being perpetually or instantly available.* Even if it's not your intention to dangle your approval over others, delayed response time raises your standing in direct correlation to how long you let them wait.

Think of the times you've waited for someone to respond to you. Who holds the power in those situations?





Nine. *Start the big hard stuff early.*

I know I said to do a few easy things first. But do the bad thing *next*. Leave time to be confused, ask questions, or start wrong.

Human nature is to put off the stuff we don't fully understand and to avoid thinking about that which we most dread. Suddenly it's midnight and everything is due and you're so totally screwed and it all breaks down.

Again.

What's wrong with you? WHY ARE YOU SO STUPID?

That's DevilYou, by the way. Didn't you assign AngelYou to reign her in?

Ten. *Do the parts you can do.*

Do everything you can do, even if you're not sure of all of it. Then ask for help with what you can't.

Read the directions – for real, this time. Call a friend. Actually read the material, take the notes, watch the videos, or try the activities. You'd be surprised how often a student thinks they're confused when really they just haven't done the work.



I mean, ideally there's a reason we assign it. If you knew how to do it already, we'd just be wasting your time. It's supposed to be hard.

When you've done the parts you can, THEN email or visit with your teacher. Otherwise we get this:

Student: *"I don't get this."*

Teacher: *"What part don't you get?"*

Student: *"Any of it."*

Teacher: *"OK, what have you tried so far?"*

Student: **long pause**

Teacher: **sigh**

Not effective. This, on the other hand...

Student: *"Mrs. _____, I have a question. I read this thing here and did this part here, and I notice in your example you indicate such and such. When I tried that, I had trouble figuring out _____"*

Teacher: *Why yes, let me do everything possible to assist you, then. That is, in fact, what I do.*

That I can work with. Makes it sound like you're not just wandering around in a daze, waiting for a miracle.

Conclusion: It's OK that it's hard sometimes. Other times, it's not nearly as hard as you make it. Try to separate your emotions from your thoughts from your abilities, and don't get so derailed by what you WISH your teachers said or did differently. They didn't, and they probably won't, so work with what you've got.

I promise you, you can do this. If I can understand it, ANYBODY can.