

COMPARTMENTALIZE YOUR STRESS TO OPTIMIZE SUCCESS

BY ANNE E. COLLIER, MPP, JD, PCC



COMPARTMENTALIZE YOUR STRESS TO OPTIMIZE SUCCESS

Even during the best of times, you have a lot going on. Whether it's numerous client demands or family responsibilities, your to-do list grows. As your list grows, so do your feelings of overwhelm. You don't know if you'll finish everything. Your head spins, you shut down or you jump from project to project. You are stressed.

It's well established that the more stress a person experiences, the lower a person's cognitive function. Thus, when you need it most, paradoxically, your brain is functioning at its worst. What do you do to maintain performance? Doing more isn't the answer. Working faster isn't the answer. Compartmentalization may be the answer.

Compartmentalizing your stress optimizes your success by creating the mental state necessary to produce excellent work. It is this singular focus that allows you to fully engage, improving performance and results, and ultimately fulfillment. Achieving this mental state requires Objectivity, Hyperfocus, and Optimal Time Orientation. These are the three Thinking Attributes in Dr. William Sparks' Actualized Leader Framework.

In essence, if you get your thinking right, you improve your capacity to compartmentalize, optimizing your success on all fronts. Here's how. First, being Objective is essential because to compartmentalize you must assess your work and capacity based on reality. If you allow your judgment to be influenced by personal feelings or preferences, you risk basing your decisions on hope. You also risk being swayed by your own guilt or desire to be all things to all people. Instead, evaluate the work and how long it will take you based on what you realistically have time to do. Prioritize based on importance and deadlines. Be straight with clients, colleagues and family members about what you can do by when.

IN ESSENCE, IF YOU GET
YOUR THINKING RIGHT, YOU
IMPROVE YOUR CAPACITY
TO COMPARTMENTALIZE,
OPTIMIZING YOUR SUCCESS
ON ALL FRONTS.



Second, improving productivity and results requires Hyperfocus. The hopeful fallacy that a person can multitask is just that. Extraordinary performance requires you to engage in an intense form of mental concentration or visualization focused on a subject or activity, which allows you to be more immersed. The point is to block out other responsibilities as distractions from your current priority so that you have the capacity to perform better.

Third, compartmentalization requires a high degree of presence and mindfulness, or what Dr. Sparks refers to as Optimal Time Orientation (OTO). While we can all learn from our past, those with OTO don't perseverate over mistakes or what could have been different. Doing so detracts from wellbeing and the capacity to focus on solving problems.

Those with a high degree of OTO look to the past with satisfaction. Likewise, people with OTO look to the future with a strategic vision rather than an anxiety-ridden mentality. The point is OTO is critical to compartmentalization because without it our minds are unable to focus on the present. A present focus is critical because action can only occur in the present. The rest is regret or worry.

12 TIPS FOR OPTIMIZING SUCCESS

Following any or all these 12 tips will improve your capacity for just about anything.

- 1 **Language your objectivity.** Practice describing situations factually and without judgment. Avoid adjectives and exaggerations. This reinforces thinking objectively about yourself and challenges.



- 2 **Be objective by being mindful.** Notice your assumptions about what is possible or required, and the “right way” to do it. Mindfully distinguish both implicit and explicit assumptions from what is so.
- 3 **Become a unitasker.** Stop kidding yourself; you aren’t multitasking when you attend a virtual meeting, check email and review an agreement. You are multi-switching. Try working for 15 minutes on a project without distraction, then decide if you’ll continue on the current project or work on another
- 4 **Hone your authentic listening to improve your Hyperfocus and OTO.** To improve your capacity for Hyperfocus and OTO, listen for the speaker’s core message. Is the speaker stressed or fearful? What are the speaker’s feelings and needs? Listening this intently has the added bonus of improving relationships and your understanding of clients’ and colleagues’ needs, priorities, problems and concerns.



- 5 **Go from overwhelm to done by bite sizing big projects.** When a project overwhelms, break it down into manageable tasks. Focus on each section in the best order for you.
- 6 **Do what you have the bandwidth for.** There are times we have the thinking power to do the hard work. There are times we don’t. Be objective about yourself and the work so that you can assign yourself what you have the capacity to do in the moment and do that. Don’t frustrate yourself or waste time by trying to perform work that requires more than you have to give .

7 **Increase bandwidth with thoughtfully scheduled breaks.** Whether it's exercise, yoga or a household chore, use time away from work to intentionally recharge, improving your capacity for the most challenging work.

8 **Timebox your to-do list.** The problem with a simple to-do list is that tasks are not grounded in time. Thus, even thinking about a to-do list can be overwhelming. Objectively review your responsibilities, due dates and plan what you will do when. This may mean that you won't focus on a project for a while, but doesn't it feel better to know when you will turn your attention to a project than have it feel like a monkey on your back?

9 **Be OK with what is not getting done now.** Let go of anxiety about what you are not doing. If you've timeboxed your commitments, rest easy knowing you'll finish the project according to plan.

10 **Offload distractions.** When you are distracted by the thought of another task, record it and continue working on the task at hand.



WHETHER IT'S EXERCISE,
YOGA OR A HOUSEHOLD
CHORE, USE TIME AWAY
FROM WORK TO
INTENTIONALLY RECHARGE.

11 **Trust your system.** People who create a system for mundane but important tasks such as timekeeping and proofreading optimize results by ensuring efficacy while freeing up bandwidth for the real work. Create your system and mindfully execute—that is, slow down to speed up. Doing so gives you confidence that you got it right and reduces the urge to repeatedly redo a task.

12 **Decided is done.** Once you've made a choice, don't obsess over whether it was the right one. Trust yourself and move forward.

Whether you want to optimize your efficacy, enjoyment or both, you might find that compartmentalization is a critical strategy.



Anne E. Collier, MPP, JD, Professional Certified Coach, is the CEO of Arudia, a firm dedicated to improving leadership, culture, collaboration and communication. She is an expert leadership coach steadfast in her commitment to excellence and her clients' goals. She coaches and delivers programming designed to support individuals, teams and organizations in amplifying their accomplishments. With confidence, intentionality and resilience, individuals and organizations alike manifest the extraordinary as they actualize better outcomes. anne@arudia.com