

The Specifics of Overwhelm

Sometimes things seem to come in groups. Have you noticed that? In my practice over the last few weeks, I have had several clients who have benefited greatly by learning to “chunk” their thinking. Chunking refers to the level of abstractness (concept) or specificity (detail) in your thoughts. It can also relate to the length of your sentences or how many items you can mentally focus on at one time.

To give you some understanding of chunking, follow the example. Let’s start by thinking of a car. If we want to chunk up from a car, we will move our thinking to be more abstract, conceptual, more “big picture.”

To chunk up on “car” we might ask, “What is ‘car’ an example of?” Perhaps you would say “transportation.” We could then ask, “Transportation for what purpose?” You may respond with “movement.” If we chunk up on movement, we might get to “freedom” or “connection with others.” Take those concepts up to another level and you may say “liberty” or even “existence.” Can you chunk up higher than existence? Perhaps you could take that all the way up to “spirit” or “God.”

Starting once again with “car”, we could also chunk down to become more detailed, more concrete, and more specific. We could ask, “What type of car?” You may respond with “Honda.” To go further we could then ask, “Specifically, what model of Honda?” You may choose the Accord. Then we can get really detailed, “Tell me something specific about the Accord you are thinking of.” You may say it has four wheels. We could then chunk down on the wheels to get to tires, rims, hubcaps, and even lug nuts.

Now, here’s the interesting thing. If you follow the path of chunking from above (and you may need to re-read it), can you appreciate that we can be talking about existence and God, or we can be talking about hubcaps and lug nuts, and we are still talking about “car”?

OK, thanks for the mini-lesson in linguistics. Now what can I use this for?

This may be a thought you have now. Here is the big picture (allow me to chunk high for a moment) for you. You have most likely heard the expression that your mind is plastic not elastic. In other words, when you learn something new your mind stays stretched to that new level of thinking. Once you learn how to chunk up and down easily, you can think circles around almost any challenge or person. And, the ability to chunk can help you get past feeling stuck in a project or feeling overwhelmed with too much to do.

So, let’s chunk back down to how do you do this. You will probably find that you are naturally better at chunking in one direction. When I first learned this, I could easily chunk up but going into the specifics and details was harder for me. With very little effort, I can now go both directions with speed and ease.

If you want to chunk up ask questions such as:

- What is an example of this?
- What is the purpose of this?
- What is the highest intention?
- For what purpose/intention?

If you want to chunk down as questions such as:

- What is this an example of?
- What specifically?
- How does this affect you?
- When does it happen?

You can see the pattern here can't you? Chunk up to get abstract and big picture, chunk down to get to the details and specifics of an issue. When you do this, you will hit a point in your thinking when it seems you can't get any further. This is when you need to push through and keep asking and thinking. When you feel stuck, you will be at the boundaries of your thinking. You may also find yourself changing direction and chunking the opposite direction. Write the words down as you chunk so you can remember what you just said. This becomes critical in chunking up because as you get more abstract, you move into a trance-like state.

Being overwhelmed is typically a symptom of being chunked too high. You see too much or too many big pictures. You feel the task is daunting and have difficulty imagining yourself being done, let alone getting started because you don't know where to start. Chunk down on the problem and it will become more manageable. Make a list as you do. Once it is broken down to small pieces you'll find the feeling of overwhelm to be suddenly gone. Chunk up on the list to determine the most important thing to do right now, (if it is not apparent to you yet.) Then start. To get over overwhelm, chunk down and get under it. The answer is in the little things at the bottom of the process.

Sometimes we feel we don't know what to do because we are faced with so many details and specifics. "Paralysis by minutiae" has you feeling like you are spinning your wheels and accomplishing very little. In his landmark book Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey discusses the principle of *Important vs. Urgent*. Being stuck in details is being stuck in urgency. We put out fires. We do small stuff. And we are frustrated because the important things don't get done.

Chunk up! Chunk up to determine what is important. Look at these minutiae from the big picture then what to do and where to start will become self-evident.

As always, this takes practice. If you really want to get good fast, try this: For the next day chunk everything, yes everything, as far as you can. If you chunk up easily, chunk down on everything for 24 hours. If you chunk down easily, go to the abstract for the next day. Practice this new way of thinking and you will get control of your thoughts before they get control of you.