



# REDEFINING "URGENT"

Malissa Clark

# What percentage of your to-do list is urgent?

If you have workaholic tendencies, I suspect it's most of it. What's more, I suspect that if you stacked up all the items on your to-do list in some kind of rank order, most of the top items are work-related. Maybe you don't even put non-work items on your list.

Making everything high priority puts you in a kind of crazy busy mode. Workaholics Anonymous's *Book of Discovery* calls this "frantic multitasking." Many people I've spoken with talk about how they almost feel addicted to the adrenaline they feel when they are in this "mode." No better way to create a mini-crisis than to assign everything as urgent.

The problem is, this means we put ourselves and our bodies in constant fight-or-flight mode, which significantly increases our stress. In fact, Dr. Darria Long, author of the bestseller *Mom Hacks*, notes that research shows that people who cannot differentiate threat from non-threat (everything is urgent!) have double the levels of stress hormones of those who can.

Remember Lauren, the former academic and member of Workaholics Anonymous whose workaholism fueled her dependence on alcohol? She recalled one vacation, stopping by a grocery store so she could pick up a cake for a family party. She got the cake but then found herself standing in the hot parking lot while her husband waited in the car with crying children.

The cake was melting in the summer sun. And “I’m having this conversation with this new study coordinator. I called her to make sure that she was doing things right. Remembering all the little details.”

“It felt urgent,” Lauren says. “And it felt like things were going to spiral out of control and somehow be a reflection on me if I wasn’t there.” It was so urgent that she interrupted her vacation, ruined a cake, and made her family miserable so she could initiate the call with this person—who, by the way, didn’t appreciate being micromanaged.

What was this urgent matter with the study coordinator? “I can’t even remember what it was.”

## No better way to create a mini-crisis than to assign everything as urgent.

Workaholics struggle with prioritization. Remember Ivy, the retired lab technician and llama ranch manager. When her therapist asked her, “Well, what *are* your priorities?” it stumped her. Eventually she said, “I’m not supposed to have priorities. I’m just supposed to get it all done.”

Likewise, Gabe told me that before he was able to get a handle on his workaholism, “everything was on the same level. Everything was important. Everything was urgent.”

It was only after he faced his workaholism head on that he could see that this mentality fostered great fear and anxiety—Gabe called himself “a big fear machine . . . And no one is successful when a big fear machine is in charge,” he said. “My constant fear of failing fostered an extremely negative environment for everyone working around me.”

According to Gabe, people could feel the fear and anxiety that his sense of urgency with *everything* created. They could read in his emails how every matter was top priority. They could hear urgency in his voice. Frantic, frazzled, hurried. And because everything was urgent, he struggled to let things go that didn’t come out as he had hoped. Even when others saw past matters as less important or even trivial, he stayed backward-focused: *Why did the company do this? Why was this action taken instead of that one?*

Now that he’s recovering, Gabe can see how treating everything as urgent not only held him back but also held back his company and those working for him: “It was very chaotic.”

As part of his process now, he has redefined what “urgent” is and allows only a few items to rise to that level. That means focusing on the five or six big-ticket items that he does every two weeks—that’s it. He doesn’t allow himself more. It’s not always easy, but sometimes the brute force of setting artificial restrictions is a good way to redefine your relationship with work and begin to see “urgent” in a new light.

Another way to help you see that not everything is as urgent as it probably seems to you, the workaholic, is to do retroactive reviews of tasks. Look at a list of things that were on your to-do list, say, a month ago, and think about how important they seem now in retrospect. Ask others what they think, too.

You may realize that what was driving the urgency around some tasks wasn't their actual importance, but your workaholic reflex to treat any unfinished work as urgently needing to be completed (and perfectly!). But looking back, you may see that the task didn't matter all that much or didn't need to be completed perfectly in that time frame. Keep notes on these tasks and try to spot them when they arise again and assign a lower priority to them.

For example, you may catalog a list of ten urgent tasks from the previous month. One item—an analysis you did for another team about a business opportunity—was urgent for you. You had to show them you had the goods and could get the work to them right away. So you cranked out the analysis in one long night. But one month later, it still hasn't been used by that team. What's more, if they do use it, it will only be for background in a presentation about a potential long-term strategy. What you thought was urgent wasn't urgent at all. The next time a similar request comes up, force yourself to critically question if it's actually a priority.

## Making everything high priority puts you in a kind of crazy busy mode.

Another way to redefine “urgent” is to assign a fixed number of non-work items to the top of your to-do list. Pin them so they can't be removed. These could be efforts to prioritize yourself and your health. It may seem simple, but to the always-on workaholic, it may not be. Literally set simple priorities, like “Eat a healthy snack.” Or “Drink lots of water” or “Take restroom breaks.” “Sleep.”

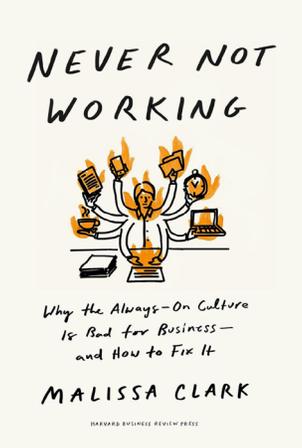
As I type this, I am reminded of my interview with Ivy. On the day I was to interview her, it was a hectic morning, and I forgot to eat lunch. Really, I didn't forget . . . I was hungry, but I didn't eat. I prioritized work over lunch. It got to be 2 p.m., and I hadn't eaten since breakfast. And since I hadn't made time earlier, I knew I wouldn't be able to eat the spring rolls I had heated up until after the interview.

Ivy told me she used to tell herself she needed to finish some task before she would go to the bathroom or eat lunch; sometimes this would take her hours to get done, and all the while she was hungry and needing to pee. I couldn't help but laugh, and sheepishly told her that I was certainly not setting a good example at this moment.

“Please,” she said. “Eat your spring rolls.” This was a small moment, but it was meaningful. I really needed to be making some of my work to-dos less urgent and my personal to-dos more urgent.

Later that night, my son and I were playing our nightly game of ping-pong (something we'd been doing for several months), and I said, “Let's play an extra couple of games tonight.” I think the realization during the interview was **a good prompt to redefine “urgent” in my life.** 📌

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Malissa Clark is an associate professor of industrial and organizational psychology at the University of Georgia, where she leads the Healthy Work Lab. She is one of the world's leading scholars on workaholism, overwork, burnout, and employee well-being. In addition to serving as an expert consultant to many organizations on these issues, Clark and her work have been featured in outlets including the *New York Times*, the *BBC*, *Time*, *Glamour*, *The Atlantic*, *HuffPost*, and others.

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