

# Overwhelm in Academia

## Restoring Hope and Choice in an Academic Career

Instructor: Diana Kardia, Ph.D.

Textbook: [The Age of Overwhelm: Strategies for the Long Haul](#) by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky

Venue: Zoom video conferencing

### Session Descriptions

#### Session 1: Understanding the Overwhelm of Academia

As a scholar/professor/mentor (and so many other things), you are likely dancing as fast as you can - with the attendant outcome of sometimes obscuring the music, the steps, and the reason for the dance floor in the first place. In this session, we will apply Lipsky's first chapter, "What Does Overwhelm Look Like?" to the meta-profession of being an academic. Our goal: a clearer-eyed look at how and why overwhelm has become such a factor in academia.

#### Session 2: More than a Brain

Academia thrives on intelligence and the capacities of both lobes of the brain: thought, logic, inspiration, ingenuity, analysis, memory, synthesis - and so much more. As such, academia is an intellectual playground. But too often the playground bullies won't let us leave, or they extract a significant tax for those slides, swings, and merry-go-rounds. We'll apply Lipsky's second chapter, "What Causes Overwhelm?" as we place our brains inside bodies, families, communities, and the inherited stress of our environment.

#### Session 3: Reinventing an Academic Life

Scholars say yes. We welcome the unknown, invest in discovery. We ignore "It's never been done before." This is how an academic is made and the foundation for success in college, grad school, and an academic career - until it becomes our undoing. How to transform the ongoing intent of "yes" into the discernment and choice needed in today's academia? We dig into this with the help of Lipsky's third chapter: "A Way Through: When Less is More."

#### Session 4: Mindfulness for the High-Minded

We intellectuals don't like being told what to do with our minds. It feels like a world champion swimmer taking swimming advice from the local Y. But as much as PhDs feel allergic to being seen as a beginner at anything, cultivating a beginner's mind along with greater presence and intentionality really does make a difference. Lipsky's chapter on "Less Distraction, More Intention" is a guide to reflection and gratitude even amidst great ambition, meaning, and accomplishment.

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### Session 5: Community for Scholars at the Edge

Scholars need community, and we need much more from community than is typically found in our departments and disciplines. In particular, we need community that names and supports the behaviors that make it possible for us to sustain the hard work of academia. In this session we'll rely on Lipsky's fifth chapter, "Disconnect Less, Be Present More," to foster the conversations and activities that make a difference to us as individuals and to the community we need.

### Session 6: Beyond Ritualized Combat

What if critique were not the gold standard of intellectual interaction? What if being right is not the only sign of excellence, much less sufficient foundation for a meaningful academic hierarchy? Linguist Deborah Tannen uses the term "agonism" to describe the ritualized combat common to academia and the ensuing cost to scholarship and scholars. In this session Lipsky's chapter on "Less Attachment, More Curiosity" will help us consider alternatives and harness the profound intellectual capacity of curiosity.

### Session 7: Exhaustion

"I'm just exhausted." Far too many of our coaching sessions with faculty and academic leaders start with this statement. It's not just the predictable times of year; it's not just teaching; it's not just the intense push to meet a grant deadline; it's not just the latest departmental crisis. It's an exhaustion that permeates, accumulates, obfuscates, and suffocates. And it's completely normalized. With help from Lipsky's seventh chapter, "Less Depletion, More Stamina," we'll consider a new normal.

### Session 8: Is Academia Worth It?

In her final chapter, "When to Step Away," Lipsky quotes the poet Dinos Christianopoulos: "They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds." In this session we cultivate the question: Is my academic career worth it? Most academics we talk to still truly hope the answer is yes, so we'll look at what makes yes possible. But we'll look at the alternatives as well - because "yes" only has meaning when "no" is a real option.