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News that Inspires

The Age of Overwhelm
by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky

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When our beloved dog had cancer, we did all we could to help him be comfortable toward the end of his life. Because Rottweilers are so strong, they require a lot of pain medication, so we y had to give him what seemed like horse tranquilizers. While we were all caring for him, my daughters were in charge of giving him his daily meds. One day the girls were gone, and as I grabbed his handful of meds I thought, "When's the last time I took my stuff?" So, I gathered all my vitamins, got a glass of water, and swished down my pills. Then I turned and looked at the counter, and my vitamins were sitting there. In that moment, I realized I'd just taken all of my Rottweiler's meds.

I stood there for a minute and decided to call the vet. The vet tech on call wasn't particularly reassuring, so I called poison control. (Mind you, I have never had to call poison control before. Not for my own kids or for any children in my care. But there I was, standing in my kitchen, calling poison control on myself.) When the pharmacist answered the phone, I said, "I just did the stupidest thing ever," and proceeded to describe exactly what happened. There was a significant pause, and then out of her mouth came, "This happens all the time."

Maybe you've had one of those moments where you know that what the person trying to comfort you is saying is not entirely true. I think we can agree, this does not happen all the time: Random 47-year-old women are not calling poison control because they're so disconnected from themselves and their immediate surroundings that they've taken their Rottweiler's medication. But in that moment, I didn't care because it was so massively reassuring to just have someone with that presence be able to remind me that I wasn't alone.

Report after report documents how—despite more technologies aimed at connecting people, ideas, and information—people of all ages continue to experience greater and greater social and personal disconnection. Why? Well, our body, mind, and spirit can only keep up with so much. When overloaded, we may disconnect because it all is too much or feels like it is too much. Disconnecting from our self and our immediate surroundings may have been a conscious or unconscious strategy from back in the day that helped us to get through. But if we don't tend to those circumstances, past and present, and if we don't constantly hone our ability to remain connected to ourselves, even amid what may feel untenable, we may unconsciously or consciously disconnect. And disconnection from ourselves can creep in gradually, stealthily, because of what we choose to expose

ourselves to or happen to be exposed to. I spoke with an 18-year-old in the wake of a terrorist attack, and when I asked how she was managing, she replied, “I try not to think too much about it. At least right now. If I do, it would all be too much.” This self-awareness is a gift. While it is true that there are times when gaining a little distance (even from our own selves) may be helpful, it is critical we bring a tenacious awareness to these moments with an intention of reconnecting fully and pre-emptively as soon as we are able.

What does this look like? When we are disconnected and not deliberate, we are often numb. We check out, we’re detached. We go through the motions and are more inclined to act with a lack of integrity. Not bringing our full presence to bear can have detrimental consequences for us and can immensely impact our interactions and relationships with others.

Fortunately, when we practice being present—conscious—we can quiet the overwhelm. A friend of mine who is a lawyer for a major U.S. tech company in China said after the death of his mother, “Present?! I don’t want to be present! I want to be the farthest fucking thing from present. Anything but present.” But when we flinch, judge, manipulate, or disconnect from that which feels intolerable, we miss the opportunity to metabolize that discomfort and transform it. We can aspire to stay engaged with our thoughts and feelings and not be thrown off by inner turbulence. Of course, part of the process is recognizing and acknowledging places and times in our lives when we are not connected…

Disconnected?

Part of why we care about keeping a close eye on if we are disconnected is that when we are disconnected, we cannot reliably gauge if we are doing harm. A residential juvenile corrections worker shared with me, “The kids all say, including my own, that I’m like the Tin Man. I have no heart.”

Time and again, I see that the sequence of harm starts, and can be interrupted, within us. Even while we’re trying to show up and do right by others, care for others, tend to small and large issues locally and out in the world, so often our ability to do that and tend to our blood pressure, and keep an eye on our moods, and generally treat our bodies well … falls by the wayside. The next step: Harm arises in our intimate relationships, whether with family members or friends. As author and professor of law Sheryll Cashin stated, “There are consequences for the children of activists.” Finally, often harm arises in our more public selves. Time and again we learn we absolutely cannot show up and help repair the world out there while allowing harm in here. By the time we are the absolute jerks at school or the co-workers folks avoid at all costs, a lot of harm has already happened much closer to home.

Another significant consequence of being disconnected is that we won’t be able to bring our quality of presence to bear. This matters in tiny, daily moments, as well as rare, epic times. Time and again in life, we learn that even when we can’t affect the outcome of a given situation, our presence can mean the difference between creating harm or escalating suffering or slightly shifting or absolutely transforming whatever is unfolding. Sometimes our ability to be present is, literally, all we have.

You know what I’m talking about, yes? Perhaps you’ve been in a vulnerable situation, when even if the ultimate outcome could not and would not change—the school suspension was going to stay the school suspension, the home foreclosure was going to

stay the home foreclosure, the diagnosis was going to stay the diagnosis—the other human being involved with access to resources, information, or authority (the head of school or the accountant or the doctor) was able to be present, make eye contact, and treat you with dignity. That person's ability to calmly bear witness had an enormous impact in terms of minimizing suffering and shifting an experience that could have caused harm to one of hardship instead.

A 17-year-old family friend reminded me just how deeply this matters when describing how isolated she felt in society at large, despite being surrounded by many loved ones. During her first year of high school, she lost a dear friend to suicide. Almost a year later, her father took his own life. She waded through trauma-filled days, yet high school still required her attention and her job still hoped for her return. "We are all now dealing with things that kids our age should never have to go through but we all do. There are these things in life you have to grapple with—and then, a month later, you're expected to take the SAT. I think a lot of people are able to be sympathetic, but not empathetic. There are so many different planes you're operating on that don't even connect. It's like you can't even fathom it all belongs in the same world."

I have seen on many occasions how unique work environments can be conducive to fostering either the best or the worst in employees. It is evident that airline call center workers, TSA agents, airport security, flight attendants, and others in the travel industry, for example, are among those who are often extremely overwhelmed by the stress of their work. But for Jay Ward, the presence of airline industry workers made a significant and long-lasting impact during the first few critical hours after his brother was murdered. [Adam Ward was a photojournalist who was shot while conducting a live television interview.] That day, employee after employee brought a presence to bear.

During the call when he learned of Adam's death, though he could not make out much from his utterly distraught parents, he clearly heard their pleading to "Please come home right away. Please." Jay and his sister lived in different cities—both across the country from their parents—but when a friend contacted the airlines on Jay's behalf, the personnel on duty that day did everything in their power to help. Seats on flights were secured such that Jay and his sister could meet on the first connecting flight possible. Airline escorts met them at the airport, ushered them through security, and took them to a room where they could wait before boarding. Canceled flights and missed connections later, each airline and airport representative did all they could to move them through the various airports seamlessly—over tarmacs and through concourses—all the while trying to screen them from the countless television screens in each airport that were reporting on and replaying the shooting over and over and over. On the last leg to their parents' home, the plane was filled with journalists and reporters traveling both to cover the story and to pay respect to their fallen comrades. The flight attendants stood watch over Jay and his sister to assure there would be no unwanted contact and handed them off to loved ones waiting at their home airport.

Jay has shared with me stories about the many, many people who helped him and his family survive this loss. But there is something particularly moving in the way he talks about each of those strangers in the airline industry. Perhaps it's because they weren't childhood friends, their family pastor, their neighbors, or their current community. Perhaps it was because each of those people—who helped Jay and his sister traverse the country as quickly as possible during an impossibly heartbreaking day—were drawing purely on their sense of humanity. There was no distracting debate on guns or discussion of workplace safety or anything else. Person after person was rooted in their ability to bring their presence to bear on behalf of those who were suffering, thereby acting with

acute decency and honoring a family’s dignity. For years after a hard time, we can reflect on how events unfolded, and sometimes what we remember most is one person who made such a difference in that moment, for better or worse. Whether in formal or informal roles, we each have countless opportunities throughout our days to bring this quality of presence to bear. We have the capacity to be this presence for the people we encounter in our life.

This excerpt from The Age of Overwhelm: Strategies for the Long Haul by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky is reprinted with permission from Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

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