

The overwhelming Mental health

Do you feel overwhelmed? Here's why - and how to fix it

Modern life is so demanding that it can lead us to feel chronically drained. How can we address the problem before everyday stress turns into burnout?

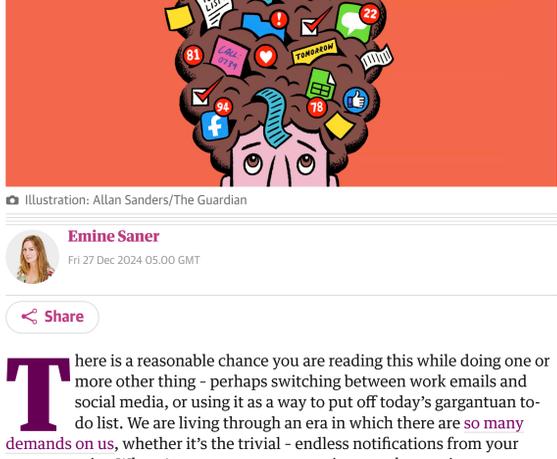


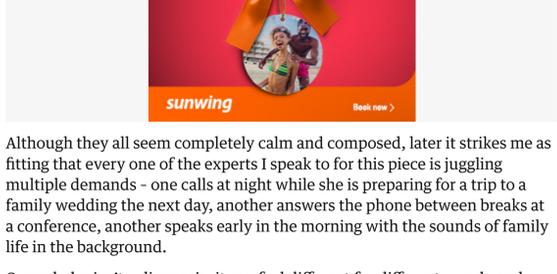
Illustration: Allan Sanders/The Guardian

Emine Saner Fri 27 Dec 2024 05:00 GMT

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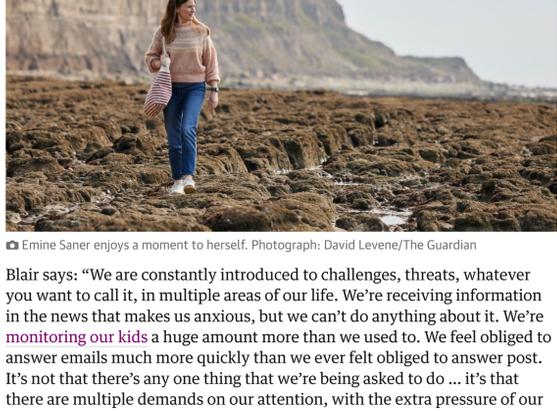
There is a reasonable chance you are reading this while doing one or more other things - perhaps switching between work emails and social media, or using it as a way to put off today's gargantuan to-do list. We are living through an era in which there are so many demands on us, whether it's the trivial - endless notifications from your most annoying WhatsApp group - or more serious, such as caring responsibilities or financial or work stresses. If you are feeling overwhelmed, you are not the only one.

Linda Blair, a clinical psychologist and author of The Key to Calm, says: "I'm getting a lot of it in my clinic." Some people feel paralysed, she says, and can't decide what to do next. "A lot of my clients say they have trouble answering any one thing, so that leaves them feeling more and more ineffective." It's demoralising, "and it's not their fault". It's not even the fault of the tasks, she says, which don't necessarily seem, to an outsider, that demanding. Blair thinks it's an issue of sheer volume, adding: "I think our attention span has already been challenged by using screens so much." The pandemic hastened this, but it didn't invent overwhelm. "The problem is managing modern life."



Although they all seem completely calm and composed, later it strikes me as fitting that every one of the experts I speak to for this piece is juggling multiple demands - one calls at night while she is preparing for a trip to a family wedding the next day, another answers the phone between breaks at a conference, another speaks early in the morning with the sounds of family life in the background.

Overwhelm isn't a diagnosis; it can feel different for different people and there aren't figures for the number experiencing it. To go by the most recent annual global stress survey by Ipsos, nearly two-thirds of people have experienced the kind of stress that has an impact on their daily life. Is overwhelm just another name for stress? "I think any time anyone is feeling overwhelmed they are likely to be experiencing stress," says Faye Begeti, a neurology doctor and neuroscientist. "But people can have stress without feeling overwhelmed - we all respond differently to stress."



Emine Saner enjoys a moment to herself. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Blair says: "We are constantly introduced to challenges, threats, whatever you want to call it, in multiple areas of our life. We're receiving information in the news that makes us anxious, but we can't do anything about it. We're monitoring our kids a huge amount more than we used to. We feel obliged to answer emails much more quickly than we ever felt obliged to answer post. It's not that there's any one thing that we're being asked to do ... it's that there are multiple demands on our attention, with the extra pressure of our brains being taught to be distractible [by devices and algorithms], that's making people get overwhelmed." We know now that multitasking doesn't work, Blair points out. "We cannot do more than one thing at a time and yet we're being asked to."

The pulls need not be emotionally and physically demanding, such as caring responsibilities or long hours in low-paid work. Even just the sense - in a world where it's never been easier to learn a new language, or listen to everything Bach ever wrote, or master YouTube pilates - that we are not using our time productively enough can be overwhelming.

"We're presented with so much evidence of opportunities that we could be taking, whether that's a side hustle, or with fitness, or with money, or whatever it is," says Alice Boyes, a former clinical psychologist and the author of Stress-Free Productivity. "The fear of missing out can increase that sense of overwhelm." Is it increasing? "I think that there is certainly an argument for that. I think a lot of people take on a lot of different roles and demands increase."

Overwhelm happens, says Begeti, "when demands exceed our capacity, which can be either short-term or chronic. Overwhelm often involves juggling numerous demands that exceed what we can reasonably handle. This could be related to work, personal responsibilities or a combination of both. It's the feeling that no matter how much we try to manage, we simply can't keep up." Begeti is the author of The Phone Fix: How to Transform Your Smartphone Habits, but she is clear that while phones and technology can exacerbate the sense of overwhelm - we can fit tasks into any spare moment by whipping out our phones - they are not necessarily the cause for everyone. "It's more about how many roles we are trying to fill simultaneously - professionally and personally - and the pressure to keep up with them all."

A problematic phone habit can be a sign of escapism when we are feeling overwhelmed, but it can also end up adding to overwhelm. The pandemic resulted in a significant increase in screen use, while the stress and uncertainty of the period (and the possible effects of long Covid) exhausted people's "executive function" - the part of our brain that plans, makes decisions and regulates emotions. The term "brain fog", with its reduced attention span and poor memory, became wearily familiar.

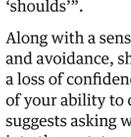
Overwhelm is draining. Begeti describes it similarly to mental fatigue, where "there is a reduction in activation of the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for complex thinking and decision-making". She adds: "In this state, we tend to lose some of our ability to think clearly and exercise willpower. People are more likely to procrastinate or act on autopilot, making impulsive decisions or reaching for short-term rewards instead of considering long-term consequences. Emotion regulation also becomes more difficult, leading to irritability, frustration and an increased likelihood of negative self-talk, with thoughts like 'I'm not good enough' becoming more prominent."

There are physical effects, too: chronic stress can have numerous negative consequences on health, such as raising the risk of diabetes and heart disease. The symptoms of chronic stress in the brain, such as decreased concentration and worsening memory, can be severe enough, Begeti says, "that people are referred to a neurological memory clinic with the worry that they are suffering with dementia".

Begeti describes the state of overwhelm as "low-power mode". "When the brain is fatigued, it tries to conserve energy to retain some capacity for potential emergencies," she says. Short-term overwhelm, she says, is reversible with adequate rest. "However, if the overwhelm turns into chronic burnout, recovery can take a lot longer." Recharging activities "that restore our mental energy" are essential, she adds. "These will be different for everyone, but can include exercise, spending time with loved ones, engaging in enjoyable activities or simply not having to respond to every message or email immediately. Regular rest and recovery are key."

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Blair points out that it's not feasible for many of us to swap a smartphone for a "brick" phone and says we have to accept that "the world is different now". Instead, we need to manage the demands on us, wherever possible: "We have to take a lot of breaks and we have to stay in control of our own timetable as much as we possibly can." Ensure you get enough good-quality sleep, she adds: "Once people feel able to focus, the next step is to prioritise the things that you need to do - and the more you're rested, the easier it is to get them done and get back on track."

Typical time-management solutions are not the answer, says Boyes. "We often have these 'shoulds' and a lot of them are perpetuated by productivity myths," she says. Often, these are espoused by people who tend to have "a lot of privilege and don't have a lot of responsibility or challenges, like sick children or sick parents, or things breaking down that you can't afford to fix, and therefore can be like this highly consistent machine". Make sure, says Boyes, "that what you're reacting to is reality and not assumptions or 'shoulds'".

Along with a sense of anxiety, overwhelm tends to come with rumination and avoidance, she says, which then perpetuates the problem. It can lead to a loss of confidence and "a mismatch between the demands and your sense of your ability to cope". To break that cycle and nudge us into action, Boyes suggests asking what is the best decision we can make. "Often, when we get into these states, we think about all the things we have done to land us in this mess. But we should be asking: 'What's the best decision I can make right now in the situation I'm in?' Sometimes, it's just getting the ball rolling doing the smallest productive thing that can help."

Even those with greater resources, who seem ruthlessly organised and efficient, must experience overwhelm at times - remarkably, they are human, like the rest of us. "Setting realistic expectations for ourselves can help," says Begeti. "One of the most important steps in preventing overwhelm is recognising that we don't have unlimited mental energy."

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