

Cognitive Load

WHY YOUR BRAIN GETS TIRED

Your brain has an incredible capacity, but it also has limits. Cognitive load refers to the total amount of mental effort your brain is using at any given time. When too much is going on, it can feel harder to think, focus, make decisions and manage emotions. This is not a personal weakness – it is how the brain works.

WHAT IS COGNITIVE LOAD?

Cognitive load is the amount of mental resources being used in your working memory. Working memory helps you hold information in mind, solve problems, make decisions and regulate your behaviour.

When the demands placed on your brain exceed its available resources, your cognitive load becomes too high, and everything feels harder.

WHY YOUR BRAIN GETS TIRED

Your brain gets tired when it has to juggle many demands at once, or when tasks require sustained attention, self-control or decision-making.

Mental effort uses energy. The more information your brain holds, processes or monitors, the faster it depletes – leading to fatigue, reduced focus and lower frustration tolerance.

COMMON CONTRIBUTORS TO COGNITIVE LOAD

INTERNAL DEMANDS

- Worry and rumination
- Managing emotions
- Self-criticism
- Physical discomfort or pain
- Low mood or anxiety
- Perfectionism

EXTERNAL DEMANDS

- Work or study tasks
- Multiple responsibilities
- Constant notifications
- Noisy or busy environments
- Interruptions
- Time pressure

DECISIONS

- Making lots of small or big decisions
- Weighing options
- Overthinking
- Uncertainty
- Trying to predict outcomes

SOCIAL DEMANDS

- Managing relationships
- Reading social cues
- People-pleasing
- Difficult conversations
- Feeling judged or observed
- Emotional labour

LIFESTYLE FACTORS

- Poor sleep
- Physical exhaustion
- Multitasking
- Information overload (news, social media)
- Lack of downtime
- Unhealthy nutrition
- Stress

SIGNS OF HIGH COGNITIVE LOAD

- Feeling mentally exhausted
- Difficulty concentrating
- Forgetfulness or feeling "scattered"
- Taking longer to complete tasks
- Difficulty making decisions
- Feeling easily overwhelmed
- Increased irritability
- Needing more time alone

THE IMPACT

When cognitive load is high, you may notice:

- Reduced focus and productivity
- More mistakes
- Difficulty learning or retaining information
- Feeling emotionally overwhelmed
- Increased anxiety or low mood
- Less ability to think flexibly or problem-solve
- A greater need for rest and recovery

A tired brain is not a failing brain.

It is a sign that you have reached your limit, and it needs support.

WAYS TO REDUCE COGNITIVE LOAD

1

SIMPLIFY

Reduce unnecessary tasks, information and decisions.

2

FOCUS

Do one thing at a time where possible.

3

EXTERNALISE

Use lists, calendars and reminders to free up mental space.

4

CREATE SPACE

Build in regular breaks and downtime – mental rest matters.

5

LOOK AFTER BASICS

Prioritise sleep, nutrition, movement and hydration.

6

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

Acknowledge your effort and set realistic expectations.

A calmer, more focused life is possible when you give your brain what it needs.

SOURCES

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