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THE **BRAIN FOG FIX**

*Common causes—and
how to conquer it*

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Wellness Practices
from around the World



THE BRAIN FOG FIX

Common
Causes of
Brain Fog—
and How to
Conquer It

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By
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Hines

I **can't think straight. I have no energy.**

“It feels like my brain is broken.”

“It's like there's a blanket over my head.”

These are just a few of the ways people describe that fuzzy, groggy feeling otherwise known as brain fog.

We all experience brain fog from time to time due to a poor night's sleep, jet lag, seasonal allergies, or daylight saving time changes.

But what do you do about persistent brain fog, which can interfere with your

mood, your work, your relationships, and your overall well-being?

Whether it's caused by medications or diet, fluctuating hormones or burnout, brain fog can be a clue that something else is going on physically or emotionally.

Here are four common causes of brain fog:

1 PHYSICAL CHANGES IN THE BODY

“It should be understood that brain fog is not a medical term. There are many medical causes



for changes in brain function,” says Lisa Shulman, MD, a neurologist at the University of Maryland Medical Center and the author of *Before and After Loss: A Neurologist’s Perspective on Loss, Grief, and our Brain*. “Brain fog can be caused by chemotherapy or a medication that has tranquilizing effects, like those oftentimes used for anxiety or muscle spasms.”

Concussions and other cognitive injuries, hormonal changes due to pregnancy, perimenopause and menopause, as well as diabetes, low-functioning thyroid, and long COVID can

also cause brain fog, memory lapses, and difficulty concentrating.

Shulman, who treats patients with neurodegenerative diseases, such as Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s, says when she hears a patient use the term “brain fog” to describe how they’re feeling, she digs deeper.

“It’s up to the clinician to identify the underlying cause. Is this potentially related to the neurologic condition or due to medicines being used for the condition? Is this brain fog a psychological response, problems with coping and adjusting to a new diagnosis?” she says.

In addition to a conversation with your health-care provider, lab work and medical tests can help determine if there’s a physical explanation for why you’re struggling with brain fog.

2 GRIEF OR SIGNIFICANT DISAPPOINTMENT/CHANGE

If you’ve recently suffered from an emotionally disruptive life event, you might also be experiencing brain fog. While we often associate grief with the death of a loved one, we also experience grief as a result of other upsetting events, such as a devastating medical diagnosis, the loss of a job, or a divorce.

The brain sees trauma as a threat to survival, which affects our ability to think clearly, concentrate, and problem solve.

Because grief triggers the brain to go into survival mode, it can temporarily inhibit our problem-solving abilities, according to Shulman.

When Shulman’s husband of 13 years died, she was caught off guard by how her grief affected her cognitive flexibility.

“I found myself doing things in a rote manner and lost the mental flexibility to make adjustments and changes that, in ordinary circumstances, I would have made,” Shulman says. “I’ve been a neurologist for decades, caring for people with serious progressive diseases. More than the average person, I was aware of what it’s like to go through these kinds of difficult times in life. But I was really taken by surprise with how difficult it

Grief triggers the brain to go into survival mode.

was to cope and heal after serious loss, which ultimately led me to research and write my book.”

Grief recovery takes time. Be intentional about integrating calming, restorative practices into your routine. Choose activities that appeal to you, like walking in nature, praying, painting, drawing, listening to music, or journaling.

3 NUTRITIONAL DEFICIENCIES

Insufficient nutrients in our diets can also affect brain functioning. Low levels of vitamins and essential minerals, like vitamin B₁₂, vitamin D, magnesium, and iron can lead to sleep problems, lethargy, moodiness, depression, and brain fog.

Brooke Seiz, a functional medicine practitioner and owner of Evolve Wellness KC, recommends nourishing the brain with foods that are rich in omega-3s (such as walnuts), turmeric (an anti-inflammatory spice found in curries and Indian cuisine), and foods high in antioxidants (such as berries). Also important are foods containing magnesium, including spinach, pumpkin seeds, avocado, and almonds.

“Magnesium is involved in the production and function of mood-regulating neurotransmitters, including serotonin, which helps reduce inflammation. Our soil is lower in magnesium than it used to be. So I often recommend additional supplementation,” Seiz says. “I’ve had clients notice that within a week or two of taking magnesium, it’s helped their sleep and brain function.”

Vitamin D levels can dip, especially in the winter months when we’re not getting as much exposure to sunlight. On average, researchers have found that our levels of vitamin D peak in September and reach their lowest levels in March. A supplement can help, as can vitamin D-fortified foods, such as cereals, plant-based milk, and orange juice.

As we age, B₁₂ levels can begin to decline and affect our ability to think clearly. B₁₂ is found in animal products, including fish and eggs, so if you’re a vegan, you may need to take a B₁₂ supplement.

“And watch out for sugar, which is a brain buster,” Seiz says. “That’s not to say don’t ever have any, but balance it out.”

The brain depends on a healthy balance of glucose as an energy source. When glucose levels are too high or too low, it can affect your memory and concentration and lead to serious health complications. To maintain healthy glucose levels, eat regular, nutritious meals, including vegetables and fruits with naturally occurring sugars, and avoid refined carbohydrates and highly processed foods.

4 BURNOUT

According to the World Health Organization, burnout is a workplace phenomenon that includes exhaustion, feelings of negativity, disengagement from your job, and reduced productivity.

“Burnout is always the result of chronic stress. By the time you get to burnout, your stress hormones, especially those rushes of adrenaline, are depleted and can barely function because they’ve been overused for so long,” says Cait Donovan, a burnout keynote speaker, podcaster, and the author of *The Bouncebackability Factor*. “People [with burnout] tell me: ‘I’m so tired I can’t do my work. I’m being an emotional jerk to my family, and I don’t know how to stop.’ You can’t grasp things the way you used to. You’re momentarily dumbed down.”

How do you know if you’re in burnout? If you go on vacation and don’t feel refreshed and ready to jump back into work, you’re probably burned out.

“When you’re burnt out, you could take off three months and still be tired,” Donovan says. “Burnout requires a much longer, more intentional recovery process.”

Donovan says that brain fog is one of the advanced symptoms of burnout and may require the support of a mental health professional or burnout recovery coach to help you overcome it.

“The things we need to create and experience for burnout to heal are safety and trust,” Donovan says. “When we’re in chronic stress, we’re constantly reacting to our environment as if it’s unsafe. Sometimes it is. And sometimes it’s an over-interpretation because you’re stuck in a stress cycle. We have to teach the body to convince itself that it’s safe because if you don’t, your brain is never going to come back online.”

5 WAYS TO BANISH BRAIN FOG



1

Practice good sleep hygiene.

Strive for 7 to 9 hours of sleep by creating a relaxing environment conducive to sleep.

For example:

- Avoid heavy, greasy meals before bedtime.
- Take a warm shower or bath.
- Make sure your bedroom is cool and dark—get blackout curtains if necessary.
- Avoid screens for the two hours leading up to your bedtime.
- Instead of the news, listen to soothing music or an encouraging audiobook.

Is anxiety or worrying keeping you up at night? “Curl up in the fetal position, pull the blanket over your head, and squeeze as tight as you can—a few times if you need to,” says functional medicine practitioner Brooke Seiz. “When we’re ruminating or worrying, the body goes into a flight response. So if we let the body do what it wants, sometimes we can get over the hump and resettle instead of fighting against it.”

2

Drink plenty of water.

It’s hard to focus if you’re dehydrated. To ensure you’re drinking enough water, divide your weight in half and then drink that much water in ounces. For example, if you’re 160 pounds, aim to drink approximately 80 ounces of water per day.

3

Move your body.

“When we’re working at computers and staring at screens, holding our necks in stiff positions all day long, we don’t have proper blood flow to the head,” says burnout expert Cait Donovan.

Throughout the day, go for short walks and take breaks to stand and stretch.



4

Try acupuncture.

Research increasingly suggests that acupuncture can be an effective, non-pharmaceutical treatment option for addressing a range of conditions that cause brain fog, such as chronic pain, cancer care treatments (including radiation and chemotherapy), hormonal disruptions, and mental health conditions.

An analysis in *The BMJ* in February 2022 found that acupuncture also reduces the severity of vascular dementia symptoms, depression, and migraines, and it can improve allergy symptoms.

5

Don’t force it.

It’s normal to experience days when you’re on your game and other days when you just don’t have the brain power to focus on a mentally taxing project.

“It’s good to be mindful of this when facing the everyday challenges we all experience,” says neurologist and author Lisa Shulman, MD. “Be forgiving. Maybe this is a good day to do something that won’t require intense concentration. Some days are like that. And that’s normal brain health.” **vi**

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