

HOW MODERN

LIFE IS GNAWING



Matt Blake on why your daily routine might be making you overstressed and dangerously under-rested

AWAY AT YOUR

VERY SOUL

Do that one really important thing

ANXIETY



INSTAGRAM

1m ago

Your mate is still on his honeymoon, FYI



TINDER

3m ago

You haven't swiped in a few days. Aren't you afraid of dying alone?



LINKEDIN

8m ago

No prospective employers have viewed your LinkedIn



INSTAGRAM

14m ago

Mum liked 67 of your photos



FACEBOOK

19m ago

Your boss just viewed your Facebook profile



MESSAGE

27m ago

Your credit card statement is ready. We suggest you don't look



FACEBOOK

28m ago

Two of your colleagues 'might' go to an event near your first school



TWITTER

36m ago

No one has liked your tweet. Delete it now?



WHATSAPP

42m ago

That sext from your girlfriend wasn't meant for you



MESSENGER

50m ago

Everyone you've ever met wants to go for 'pints soon?'



FACEBOOK

58m ago

Dad is live from 'Bed' on Facebook now

It's been 10 minutes since I sat down to write this article, and already all I want to do is

check my phone. I want to see if anyone important has emailed me – maybe about a job. I'd quite like to check the BBC News app, too. I could just as easily check Twitter, of course. But then I'd have to tweet something witty about it for my followers. I'll do that and check in an hour to see if I got any likes. I'll just check Facebook and Instagram while I'm here, too; see if anyone's put pictures up of the party they say they forgot to invite me to on Saturday. Bastards. Anyway, back to work. Where was I? Oh: anxiety.

Never has the human brain been so busy. In 2012, scientists at the University of Southern California released a study that revealed the average human mind receives 175 newspapers-worth of information a day, compared to just 40 in 1986. Now that figure is surely more – a blitzkrieg of facts, fake news, hearsay and jibberjabber, all masquerading as legitimate information. Trying to cut through the clutter is exhausting, not to mention navigating the countless platforms on which we receive it.

Then there are the hundreds of decisions we're forced to make every day, from how to reply to a text to which sandwich to buy at lunch. "In 1976, the average supermarket stocked 9,000 unique products; today that number has ballooned to 40,000," writes neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin in his 2015 book *The Organised Mind*. "Yet the average person gets 80-85 per cent of their needs in only 150 different supermarket items. That means that we need to ignore 39,850 items in the store."

Constant access to email means work never stops; we have an app for everything; technology monitors our every move, both in public and at home; social media is always on. Never has the world moved so fast.

"We consume more information in a day than a man in the Middle Ages would have known through his entire lifetime," says Dr David Lewis, a renowned neuropsychologist, author and founder of mental health website themindchangers.co.uk. "We're living in an age of anxiety amid a glittering haze of information and misinformation. We are not

volunteers; we are being compelled to ingest this stuff, as if we've fallen into a well of information and we don't know how to get out."

THOUGHT FATIGUE

This overstimulated state is what Lewis calls "infoglut". "It's not just that we're surrounded by information," he says. "But we're surrounded by pressures to acquaint ourselves with, say, the latest tweet from a friend or whatever. We somehow feel we need to be part of the mainstream, and if we're not we're going to be cut off from the rest of the world. The perceived inability to access everything in our environment can lead to information-fatigue syndrome: that overwhelming feeling that you can no longer take it all in and start getting diverted by insignificant things and missing the points of great significance."

But, if I'm constantly connected, I'm never alone. Right?

"Wrong," says professional YouTuber Tom Ridgewell. "The internet used to be an escape from real life. But now, for my generation certainly, real life has become an escape from the internet. The constant influx of information is crippling. I f*cking hate it, I'm so addicted."

With 5.5 million subscribers across his two channels, Tom – or

"THE INTERNET USED TO BE AN ESCAPE FROM REAL LIFE. BUT NOW REAL LIFE IS AN ESCAPE FROM THE INTERNET"

TomSka to his fans – is one of Britain's biggest YouTube stars. You'd think the 27-year-old from Cambridge would harbour some warm feelings to the thing that pays his bills. Yet, while he says he loves making YouTube videos for his fans, he's refreshingly candid about the adverse effects the internet's had on his life.

"I want to turn social media off but I can't," he says. "The first thing I do in the morning is check Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook and Instagram. And that's before I even start my day. Sometimes, maybe about 20 per cent of the time, I'll see something that will instantly ruin my day; someone will send something nasty to me on Twitter, or I'll get an email. I mean, just this morning the BBC News jingle blasted from my phone and I took a deep breath before pulling it out, because we now hear of every tragedy, every shooting, genocide, earthquake and flood. It's just devastating."

It was this constant connectivity of modern life, he



says, that triggered a recent bout of depression. "There's depression in my family so I'm not saying it's the sole cause, but the stress of having to be constantly available, day and night, is a huge part of it," he says. "Plus, the pressure to project the best side of yourself all the time doesn't just wear you down, if you are predisposed to it, it can be impossible to get out once it's begun. There's no time to heal."

He laughs: "But if I didn't have a Facebook, how am I going to get invited to parties?"

TASK OVERLOAD

Your smartphone is more powerful than the computer Nasa used to send Neil Armstrong to the moon. A modern-day Swiss army knife of information access; it's a dictionary, calculator, news service, games console, web browser, GPS, storyteller, music DJ, sex finder and more.

Yet, while we think we are capable of doing many things at once, Dr Lewis says the idea of multitasking is a treacherous illusion – in 2014, University of London psychiatrists proved that multitasking with electronic media ravages your mind worse than smoking weed. "We may think we are multitasking – checking emails and Facebook while working, or listening to music – but our brains are not wired to multitask. It puts a huge cognitive load on the brain."

This, according to Levitin, "creates a dopamine-addiction feedback loop, effectively rewarding the brain for losing focus and for constantly searching for external stimulation". Compounding the problem, he writes, the prefrontal cortex has a "novelty bias", meaning its attention is easily overrun by

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Put simply, it is a sense of fear and apprehension that puts you on alert. Biologically, it's meant to put us in a heightened state of awareness so we're prepared to run away from tigers, or hit a tight deadline. "This can be a good thing, up to a point," says neuropsychologist Dr David Lewis. "It's the kind of stress that gets you up in the morning or what puts athletes in 'the zone'. But it can quickly turn into negative anxiety; the sense that we've lost control of a situation."

Anxiety unleashes a chemical cascade of the stress-hormone cortisol as well as the fight-or-flight hormone adrenaline. This can overstimulate your brain. Worse, it sucks blood from your extremities to your core organs and muscles to react as effectively as possible. "It's like a battleship going into action stations: the captain will take sailors away from the bakery and so on, and make them man the guns," says Lewis. As a result, your heart rate increases, your

blood pressure rises and your digestive system stops because, Lewis says, there's no point in digesting food if you're about to be another animal's dinner. But there's a techno-fly in the ointment. "If, say, your boss is chewing you out, you can't run away or punch him, which would be the evolutionary response to this. So you have to sit and take it. It means all this adrenaline has nowhere to go. That is where the churning stomach and dry mouth comes from."

➔ something new. "It is the ultimate empty-caloried brain candy. Instead of reaping the big rewards that come from sustained, focused effort, we instead reap empty rewards from completing a thousand little sugar-coated tasks."

This growing obsession to 'keep up' is infecting our minds and bleeding into our sleep. Researchers in Norway have found that constantly shining screens in our faces late into the evening is positively associated with sleep onset latency – the amount of time it takes to fall asleep. "Insomnia is increasing in society," says biomedical scientist Dr Alexis Willett, co-author of *How Much Brain Do We Really Need?* "We know from neuroimaging studies that people who have insomnia but no other symptoms of disease do show brain changes, such as shrinking of the cortex, suggesting that chronic sleep disturbance may be having a negative effect on the brain."

HANDLING STRESS

So what can we do about it? Can we undo the damage the modern world is doing to our minds?

Dr Graham Murray, a psychiatrist and neuroscientist at Cambridge University, says it could be as simple as a stroll in the park. "People born in cities are more prone to anxiety and depression than those born in the countryside," he says. "Studies have shown that spending time in a green space can mitigate some of the stressful effects of the busy city." Dr Lewis has an even simpler method: hand-warming. "Either imagine you're next to a roaring fire or physically rub your hands together to drag that reassigned

bloodflow from your core organs back to your extremities. You will feel better."

And then, there is always mindfulness – book sales on spiritual growth are booming, having risen 13 per cent in 2017 alone. Though, not everyone is convinced. "Mindfulness is not a panacea – yet it is often presented as such," says Dr Catherine Wikholm, co-author of *The Buddha Pill: Can Meditation Actually Change You?* "Despite how it is often sold to us (mindfulness is a multimillion-pound industry), mindfulness isn't a quick-fix, sure-fire route to a stress-free, anxiety-free life. Mindfulness might be the latest buzzword in mental health, but it's important to recognise that it is simply one tool in the tool box when it comes to managing stress or anxiety. And it doesn't work for everybody."

James Shillcock, founder of tea brand Vivid Matcha and founding partner of mental wellbeing festival 'Stories Of

"IT'S HARD TO OVERSTATE HOW MUCH BETTER MY LIFE IS WITHOUT SOCIAL MEDIA AND ALL THE OTHER STIMULI I'D JACK UP ON"

Being', says a number of relatively simple lifestyle changes saved his life after an extended period of severe depression when he was 24. "I had reached breaking point and I couldn't see a way out. Now I'm convinced that my cycle of depression, paranoia and anxiety was caused by cumulative

lifestyle factors," says the 30-year-old Londoner. "It was only when I realised that something had to give for the sake of my family that I started to change things."

Initially James gave up sugary food and deleted all personal social-media accounts. "Without a doubt these two changes created the biggest positive impact on my physical and mental health and have the added benefit of improving my focus and attention span at work." Later he started to turn his phone off for hours every day, meditating and doing Brazilian jiu-jitsu. He says he also takes daily cold showers to increase norepinephrine in the brain. "It's hard to overstate how much better my life is without social media, sugar, coffee and all the other stimuli I'd been jacking myself up on for so long," he says. "It's allowed me to optimise my brain in ways I never imagined, start a business and be happy."

THE RAT TRAP

About two minutes ago, that tweet I sent earlier got a like, and my nucleus accumbens (the same pleasure-regulating section of brain that rewards gamblers and drug addicts) is buzzing. Even that deadline stress seems a little lighter now. It didn't last long, like all highs. But I know I'll get another one when I email the story to my editor. And another if he replies positively. The same thing happens when a new text or tweet appears on your screen. It demands your attention because of the social expectation that an unanswered message insults the sender. The novelty bias in your prefrontal cortex activates and gives you that tiny bump of lovely dopamine as a reward for finishing a task. With each bump the limbic system in your brain screams: 'FEED ME MORE!'

The whole thing is reminiscent of what neuroscientists Peter Milner and James Olds did with lab rats in 1954. They planted tiny electrodes inside rodents' nucleus accumbens and placed a lever in the cage that they could push to send a pleasurable electrical quiver into their brains. They were instantly hooked on the mini-high and it became all they did. Soon they completely gave up on food, sleep and sex to manically zap themselves up to 2,000 times an hour. Then they all collapsed due to starvation and exhaustion.

Sound familiar? I think it's time for a walk in the park. **S**

ANXIETY DREAMS RATED

WE ASKED PANIC-PRONE TRISTAN CROSS TO RANK HIS OWN FRETFUL REVERIES

4. The Football

Dreamt I frantically looked through a never-ending *Radio Times* to find out when *Match Of The Day* was on. It never was.

3. Ronaldo

Tried to get a quick selfie with Cristiano Ronaldo and he kept angrily making me retake them over and over because he said I didn't look good enough.



2. The Funeral

Had to sing Baccara's *Yes Sir, I Can Boogie* at someone's funeral. Possibly my nan's. Everyone loved it, but I wasn't allowed to stop.



1. Baking

I was tasked with punching a conveyor belt of bread into shape in this empty bread factory. I woke myself up by punching the corner of my desk and cutting my hand.



INSTAGRAM

6m ago

Your mum, a newcomer to Instagram, just saw you like that cleavage shot



CALENDAR

14m ago

You have plans every evening for the rest of your life



FACEBOOK

22m ago

Your friend commented on a video that your mutual friend was tagged in three years ago