

- Mental health

# Better health: how to relax an overwhelmed mind

## Is modern life making you feel overwhelmed and overloaded? Here’s how to relax a racing mind

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In the past, if someone wanted to contact us there were limits as to when or how they could do so. But these days, we are contactable and connected to the outside world 24/7.



With the touch of a button, we can instantly access news from across the globe and see every adventure of every person on social media. We’re scrolling so quickly through headlines, updates, notifications, messages and photos, that our brains can barely process what we’ve seen, let alone how we feel about it.

Is it any wonder, then, that millions of Brits have reported feeling stressed and overwhelmed, with recent research finding that over a third of us are feeling more exhausted than ever? Psychotherapist Rebecca Stone (Counsellorwhocares. co.uk) says, “It can be hard to switch off in today’s world, but this ‘always on’ behaviour can be harmful to our health, with chronic stress linked with high blood pressure, heart disease, depression and anxiety. Of course, none of us are going to ditch our phones or stop reading the news completely, but it’s important we consider how much time we’re spending connected to the online world and give our brains the rest they really need.”

### Set some boundaries

One way to curb the information overload and stop ourselves feeling overwhelmed is to set boundaries – both with others and ourselves. “We live in an instant response culture and that can feel quite pressurising,” says Rebecca. “But there’s no harm in acknowledging to someone that you’ve received their communication without having to reply immediately.

### A third of Brits feel more exhausted than ever

You need rest and care too. In fact, a recent study found that even just the expectation that we should always be available to answer work emails out of working hours decreases our wellbeing. Instead, make a rule – either privately or openly with friends and colleagues – that you won’t reply to messages, for example, between 8pm and 8am.

Your energy levels, focus and brain will benefit from it.”

As well as being firm with others, it’s important to impose strict rules on yourself, too. “Set a reminder on your phone that tells you when you’ve had 15 minutes of screen time, so you don’t get lost mindlessly scrolling and try to only use your phone in a certain room of the house,” says Rebecca. “For example, I have a rule that I never have my phone beside me in the evening when I’m watching TV, so I can properly unwind. I also don’t watch the news just before I go to bed, so my mind isn’t left processing upsetting headlines as I’m trying to unwind for sleep. It can also be useful to schedule some ‘unplug time’ where perhaps one evening a week or one hour a day you don’t go on your phone at all.” In addition to where and for how long you use your devices, being selective about when you log on and the medium you use can make a positive difference, too. “Did you know the average Briton spends four hours a day on their phone, uses an average of 6.7 individual sources for news, receives 93 messages or notifications and over 100 emails?” poses Rebecca. “Is it any wonder we feel so wrung out by the end of the day?

“Try being more mindful about what you’re reading. For example, choose just one or two news outlets you really trust and get your news from there. Next time you’re bored in a queue, instead of just instantly scrolling on your phone and giving your brain even more stimulation and content to process, why not just practise being in the moment. Opening items you wish to read in moments when you have the time to properly absorb them will be much less stressful.” Another hack for protecting against mindless scrolling is to avoid using your phone for the first half hour in the morning and to log out of all social media accounts on your devices. “Even the few seconds it takes you to log back in provides an opportunity for you to pause and think, ‘Do I need to be doing this right now?’,” says Rebecca.

### Protect your senses

“Sometimes when we’re feeling stressed or overwhelmed, our senses can become heightened,” explains Rebecca. “On the other hand, studies have found that silence may help lower blood pressure, calm racing thoughts and improve focus. Always listen to what your body needs.

“For example, if your brain is feeling bombarded, it may help you to avoid busy crowds or noisy environments for a while and just go for a quiet walk somewhere to clear your mind. It’s different for everyone but finding an activity that helps you decompress makes a big difference.” Practising mindfulness and making use of breathing techniques can be helpful, too.

“Research has shown that diaphragmatic breathing can offer physiological and psychological stress relief, and improve mood,” says Rebecca. “If you find yourself getting overwhelmed, try taking deep breaths, focusing on every inhale and exhale. I find that apps like Calm help too, or even just concentrating on the sound of the rain outside or the birds. My advice is to not try to overdo it. Although 30 minutes is great, this can seem a lot when you’re starting out, so start with five and build up from there.”

Reaching out to others and experiencing physical contact can positively influence our mood and stress levels, too. “When we’re feeling overwhelmed, overloaded or overstretched, often what we need is that

comfort, reassurance and to feel connected with others,” adds Rebecca. “We might think that when we’re firing off messages, clicking ‘like’ or commenting on news stories that we’re connecting with people, but research suggests that actually this type of contact can leave us feeling more disconnected. “After all, you can’t read someone’s tone or make eye contact over email. By contrast, actually being with someone in person, and having a cuddle, releases oxytocin, helping our bodies and brains to feel calmer and more at peace.”

Silence may help lower blood pressure and improve focus