

Popcorn brain: how information overload can affect mental health

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Do you notice how much harder it is to focus while constantly tethered to digital devices that leave you open to a relentless onslaught of information? Thoughts jump from one idea to another – not unlike the popping of corn kernels.

In 2011, University of Washington researcher David Levy coined the phrase “popcorn brain” to describe this condition.

Lately it has been popping up regularly on social media: a recent Instagram video from American podcast host, author and motivational speaker Mel Robbins on the subject has garnered more than 67,000 likes since it was posted on June 3.

Studies have long shown that prolonged use of phones, computers and social media can have a detrimental effect on how our brains process information and can significantly affect our attention span.

Dr Sonia Lal Gupta, a senior neurologist and director at the Metro Group of Hospitals in New Delhi and managing director of the Metro College of Health Sciences & Research in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, says popcorn brain occurs when the brain is overwhelmed with multiple thoughts and divided attention.

“Today’s digital platforms and social media bombard the brain with an overwhelming amount of information,” she says. This makes it difficult to focus on a single task at a time owing to the constant stimulation.

This struggle to sustain a single train of thought leads to increased stress, information overload, attention deficit, and increased anxiety, Gupta says.

Ultimately our relationships and quality of life suffer as our emotional well-being and overall productivity decline.

“Online platforms and social media sites use algorithms that feed us a constant stream of information, notifications, and entertainment, addressing our interests and behaviours,” she says.

This can lead to overstimulation of the brain’s reward system – which releases dopamine, a “feel-good chemical” that keeps us wanting more.

New Delhi-based Chhavi Mehtaa, an online English teacher and author of *Conscious Parenting*, a handbook for young parents, suffered the symptoms of popcorn brain.

“Due to my online classes I was conducting sessions at all odd hours and across time zones with my global clients. This led to sleep deprivation, skipping of meals and overwork,” the 45-year-old says.

Her work started to severely affect her vocal cords, then one day she discovered she could not lift her right arm.

“I thought I’d become paralysed,” Mehtaa says. At the hospital, she learned the problem was due to physical – and mental – issues, and enrolled in therapy.

A counsellor advised her to reduce her work hours, set a timer to turn off digital devices to limit her exposure, and to do physical exercise. This helped her slowly regain her health and

mental equilibrium.

A person with popcorn brain's inability to focus on interpersonal interactions strains relationships, further isolating individuals, Gupta says.

For Roli Gaur, a Delhi-based social media strategist, extended use of her phone and computer profoundly affected her family ties.

"It got so bad that I stopped interacting with my two young kids," she says.

"One day, I felt so disconnected [from] them that I got hold of the younger one, cuddled her, and cupped her face in my hands. I gazed at her with tears flowing down my cheeks. It made me realise that I hadn't looked at her face for days."

The 35-year-old says she also developed blurred vision from her digital addiction.

A wellness counsellor devised a plan for Gaur, to cut down her social media usage and spend more quality time with her family. Both changes have helped her to "reorient her life for the better".

In her 2023 book *Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness, and Productivity*, University of California Irvine researcher Gloria Mark discusses her two-decade study of attention.

It suggested that human attention spans on any device have declined from an average of 2.5 minutes in 2004 to 47 seconds in the past five to six years.