Your brain

How it works, what wears it out,
and the conditions it needs to do its best.

You are not lazy, or scattered, or failing.
You may be asking your brain for too much at once.

A PLACE TO START

For anyone who has wondered why they cannot think straight when they are tired, stressed, or overwhelmed. Plain language, based on research, with every source named. The last pages show where to continue. Written by someone who is not a medical professional.

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Start anywhere

There is no right order. Go to the page you need today, and print only that page if you like. Every page stands on its own. On a phone, tap any line or box to type.

People use different words for themselves. I use the ones most people have told researchers they prefer, and yours are welcome here.

> If you only have energy for one page today: **Two-minute brain resets**, page 9.

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Understanding is the first act of care.

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ONE

What your brain does

Your brain has around 86 billion nerve cells. It is about 2% of your body's weight, and it uses about 20% of your energy. It is busy all the time, even when you rest.

Different parts share the work. Here are five worth knowing.

Part	Where	What it does for you
Prefrontal cortex	The front, behind your forehead	Plans, focuses, holds things in mind, and puts the brakes on impulses.
Amygdala	Deep inside, one on each side	The alarm. It spots danger, fast, before you have had time to think.
Hippocampus	Deep inside, curled like a seahorse	Makes new memories, and helps you learn and find your way.
Insula	Folded inside, near the sides	Reads the signals from inside your body: heartbeat, hunger, feelings.
Brainstem	Where the brain meets the spine	Keeps you breathing, keeps your heart beating, keeps you awake.

Every brain is built from the same parts, and no two work in quite the same way.

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TWO

Your brain's messengers

Nerve cells talk to each other with chemical messengers. Here are the ones you will hear about most.

Messenger	What it helps with	When it is out of balance, people may notice
Dopamine	Motivation, reward, focus, starting things	Everything feels flat, and hard to begin. It works differently in ADHD.
Serotonin	Steady mood, patience, sleep, digestion	Low mood, tearfulness, worry
GABA	The brake: quieting thoughts and tension	Restless, on edge, waking in the night
Glutamate	The accelerator: alertness and learning	Too much can feel wired
Cortisol and adrenaline	Short bursts of focus in an emergency	Kept high for long, they bring fog and memory trouble

Hormones sit close to this panel. Oestrogen supports dopamine and serotonin, and a substance made from progesterone works on the GABA brake. That is part of why perimenopause can unsettle mood, focus, and sleep.

This is simplified. Mood and focus are never down to one chemical, and life around you matters as much.

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THREE

Why you cannot think straight under stress

The psychiatrist Dan Siegel calls these the upstairs brain, the thinking front, and the downstairs brain, the alarm. When you are calm, the front of your brain leads. When stress is high, the chemistry changes. The front of your brain goes quieter, and the alarm grows louder.



This is why, when you are overwhelmed, you forget words, lose your keys, snap, or freeze in a meeting. It is an old survival design: in danger, act first and think later.

When stress goes on for months, research shows it can weaken the connections in the front of the brain. The kind news is that in animal studies, these changes often reversed once the stress ended.

WHEN I AM STRESSED, MY THINKING

Not being able to think is not a character flaw. It is chemistry.

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FOUR

Mapping your brain's modes

Your brain shifts between modes, depending on sleep, stress, hormones, and how much it has had to take in. Your clues are your own. Fill in the last column.

These match the settled, wired, and flat states in *Your nervous system*.

Mode	What it can feel like	What you might notice	My clues
Online front of the brain leading	Clear, focused, patient, able to switch	Decisions come easily; words flow	
Overheated the alarm leading	Racing thoughts, dread, harsh inner critic	Overthinking a simple email; snapping; cannot stop scrolling	
Foggy running on empty	Blank, flat, too many tabs	Losing words; staring at a task; head full of cotton wool	

THE MODE I SLIP INTO MOST

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FIVE

Your mental desk

Your **working memory** is like a small desk where you hold what you are using right now. Research suggests most adults can hold only about **four things** on it at once.

Every worry, open task, and "don't forget" takes up room. When the desk is full, something falls off.

WHAT IS ON MY DESK RIGHT NOW

EVERYTHING ELSE, OUT OF MY HEAD AND ONTO THIS PAGE

Paper is a second desk. Use it, and give your brain its room back.

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SIX

Your brain runs on a budget

Your brain uses energy all day. Some things spend a lot of it, often without you noticing. When the budget runs out, focus, patience, and memory go first.

WHAT SPENDS MORE

- [ ] Switching between tasks
- [ ] Many small decisions
- [ ] Noise, light, and busy places
- [ ] Hiding how I feel, or masking
- [ ] Worry running in the background
- [ ] Not enough sleep, food, or water

WHAT REFILLS

- [ ] Sleep
- [ ] A walk, or any movement
- [ ] Food and water
- [ ] Quiet, or time alone
- [ ] Doing one thing at a time
- [ ] Time with someone who feels safe

Tick what is true for you. These are common, and yours may differ.

MY BIGGEST SPEND THIS WEEK

ONE REFILL I COULD ADD

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SEVEN

Two-minute brain resets

Trying harder rarely brings the thinking brain back. Small physical shifts often do.

If your mind is overheated

1. **Name it.** "This is overwhelm." In brain-imaging research, putting a feeling into words calmed the alarm.
2. **Widen your gaze.** Soften your eyes and take in the edges of the room.
3. **Empty your desk.** Write every swirling thought on paper, in any order.

If your mind is foggy

1. **Shrink it.** Not "clean the kitchen". One mug in the sink.
2. **Move.** March on the spot, or touch opposite hand to knee, for thirty seconds.
3. **A small spark.** Cold water, a smell of mint or citrus, one song you love.

THE RESET THAT WORKS BEST FOR ME

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EIGHT

What your brain does while you sleep

Sleep is not your brain switching off. It is your brain doing the work it cannot do while you are awake.

1

It files the day

Sleep helps your brain store what you learned and lived.

2

It clears waste

In a 2013 study in mice, the brain cleared waste much faster during sleep, as the spaces between cells opened up.

3

It resets the alarm

After poor sleep, the alarm is quicker to sound, and the front of the brain is slower to calm it.

MY SLEEP THIS WEEK

Date	What helped	What got in the way

Sleep is not time taken from your life. It is how your brain keeps up with it.

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NINE

Your brain can change

Your brain keeps changing all your life. Scientists call this **neuroplasticity**. What you do often, your brain makes easier.

ONE STUDY · PNAS, 2011

WHO	120 adults, mostly in their sixties
WHAT	Brisk walking for 40 minutes, three times a week, or stretching
HOW LONG	One year
WHAT THEY FOUND	In the walking group, the hippocampus, the memory part of the brain, grew by about 2%. In the stretching group, it shrank a little, as usually happens with age.

You do not need a big plan. Small, repeated, and kind is how a brain learns.

ONE SMALL THING I WANT MY BRAIN TO FIND EASIER

WHAT I WILL REPEAT, AND WHEN

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TEN

A brain-friendly day

Not a rigid timetable. A rhythm that works with your energy. Take what helps.

When	Ideas	Mine
Morning	A minute of daylight before your phone. Protein at breakfast. Your one or two hardest tasks in your clearest hours, written on a note.	
Midday	A real lunch, with protein and fibre. Ten minutes of low stimulation: a walk, or eyes closed, no scrolling.	
Late afternoon	A doorway reset: long breaths out, shoulders down, soft clothes. Easy tasks only, paired with music.	
Evening	Lamps, not overhead lights. Tomorrow's worries onto paper. A cool bedroom.	

Your clearest hours are precious. Spend them on what matters most to you.

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ELEVEN

The conditions your brain needs

Your brain does its best work in the right conditions. Small and repeated is better than big and rare.

Sleep

Enough, and at regular times. One of the biggest helps.

Movement

Walking counts. It feeds the memory part of the brain.

Food and water

Your brain runs on what you give it, all day.

One thing at a time

Switching costs more than it seems.

Write it down

Lists, calendars, and notes give your desk room.

Quiet

Less noise and fewer tabs, on screen and in your head.

Breaks

Short pauses, before you are empty.

People

A safe person calms the alarm, so the front can think again.

Change the conditions, and your brain will meet you there.

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TWELVE

How it all connects

Brain, nervous system, hormones, grief, burnout, and neurodivergence are not separate problems. They are one system, responding to your biology and your load.

1. ### A mind that works hard to filter
   Many neurodivergent people spend extra energy on senses, plans, and fitting in.

2. ### Long stress or grief
   The alarm stays on, and the reserves run low.

3. ### A hormone change
   Perimenopause can take away some of the quiet support for dopamine and the GABA brake.

4. ### Everything at once
   Burnout, fog, and overwhelm, often in midlife.

None of this is a lack of willpower. And because it is all connected, steadying any one part, sleep, hormones, sensory rest, or a routine outside your head, helps steady the rest.

Each of these has its own free guide on my site.

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THIRTEEN

My brain

Fill in what is true for you. Every brain is different, and yours is the one you live with.

MY BEST TIME OF DAY TO THINK

MY HARDEST TIME OF DAY

WHAT HELPS ME FOCUS

WHAT SCATTERS ME

WHERE MY SECOND DESK LIVES · NOTEBOOK, PHONE, WALL

> FOR EXAMPLE
> I think best before eleven. Open-plan noise scatters me. My second desk is a notebook by the kettle, and one list on the fridge.

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FOURTEEN

Asking for what your brain needs

Once you know how your brain works best, you can ask for the conditions that help it.

At work

Instructions in writing. One priority at a time. Agendas before meetings. A quiet place to think.

With a doctor

If memory or focus has changed, bring notes: what, since when, and what you can no longer do.

At home

Shared lists and calendars, so it is not all on your desk.

With yourself

Plan your hardest thinking for your best time of day.

> THREE SENTENCES
>
> "I lose track when tasks arrive in passing. When I have them in writing, I can plan and deliver. Could we send actions by email after our meetings?"

WHAT HAPPENS, WHAT HELPS, AND WHAT I AM ASKING FOR

For more, there is *Advocating for yourself*, free on my site.

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FIFTEEN

Where to continue

This guide is a place to start. Here is where to go next.

TO READ MORE

Your national health service's website, and the Cleveland Clinic Health Library, both written in plain language. From me, free: *Your nervous system*, *Neurodiversity*, *ADHD*, *Menopause*, *My user manual*, *Advocating for yourself*, and *The circadian rhythm*.

TO FIND SUPPORT WHERE YOU LIVE · WORDS TO SEARCH, ADDING WHERE YOU LIVE

What you are looking for	Words to search
Memory or focus worries	*[your doctor's surgery or clinic] · memory clinic referral*
Sleep	*sleep clinic referral · CBT for insomnia [your country]*
Focus at work	*occupational health · reasonable adjustments · workplace needs assessment*
Brain health and movement	*walking group [your area] · brain health course*
Someone to talk to	*talking therapy near me · counsellor [your town]*

WHAT I FOUND, AND WHO I WILL CONTACT FIRST

If you are struggling tonight and cannot wait, please do not sit with it alone. In Scotland, 111 reaches the NHS 24 Mental Health Hub at any hour, and Samaritans are on 116 123, free, day or night. In the United States and Canada, call or text 988. Anywhere else, findahelpline.com lists the lines that operate in your country. In an emergency, call your local emergency number.

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Where this comes from

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Why it is free

Most of us were never taught how our brains work, so we blame ourselves when they are tired. This guide is yours to keep, print, and hand to someone.

I am not a medical professional. This guide diagnoses nothing and is not medical advice. If something in your body or mind worries you, please see a doctor.

Valerie McIntyre-Baird