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BY LISA EVANS

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We live in an age of information overload. While many of us find ourselves inundated with vast amounts of data daily, our fast-paced society also requires us to make more rapid decisions.

Psychologist and behavioral neuroscientist [Daniel Levitin](#), author of the upcoming book *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload*, says information overload creates daily challenges for our brains, causing us to feel mentally exhausted before the day's end.



"Our brains are equipped to deal with the world the way it was many thousands of years ago when we were hunter-gatherers," says Levitin. "Back then the amount of information that was coming at us was much less and it came at us much more slowly."



The pace at which we're exposed to information today is overwhelming to our brains, which haven't adapted fast enough to easily separate relevant data from the irrelevant at the speed we're asking it to. As a result, our brains become easily fatigued, and we become more forgetful. By using principles of neuroscience, Levitin says we can regain control over our brains by organizing information in a way that optimizes our brain's capacity.

1. EXTERNALIZE DATA

Rather than carrying around in your head a to-do list of 20 or 30 items, put them on paper. Getting information out of your head and into the external world helps you to see it objectively so you can make decisions about what you will tackle, and in which order.

Rapidly switching tasks also lowers your IQ by 10 points.

When information is only stored in your head, the brain has a hard time focusing on everything, and uses up too much of its energy trying to recall what's on your list. Writing down your list manually also helps to encode the information into your brain through the use of muscle memory.

2. MAKE BIG DECISIONS IN THE MORNING

"Each time you make a decision, it uses some neuro-resources," says Levitin. The problem is these neuro-resources are used up whether you're making an [insignificant decision](#) such as which pen to use out of a drawer of pens, or something important such as whether to sign a multimillion-dollar deal.

"If you spend your day making a bunch of little decisions and it comes time to make a big important one, you're neurologically depleted," says Levitin, who calls this phenomenon decision fatigue. Scheduling your important decision-making tasks at the beginning of the day maximizes your brain's resources, and can help you make better decisions.

3. BE ORGANIZED

Being organized in your physical environment lessens the burden on your brain. Have a designated place for commonly misplaced items such as keys, glasses, and cellphones. Allow your physical environment to serve as reminders, alleviating the pressure on your brain to recall things.

Levitin cites an example of forgetting to take your umbrella. "You hear the weather report that it's going to rain tomorrow so you make a mental note to take your umbrella, but when you wake up in the morning, there's a

100 other things on your mind,” he says. Hanging the umbrella on the doorknob when you hear the weather report reduces the clutter in your brain the next morning—and you’re less likely to get wet.

4. MULTITASKING IS A MYTH

How many times in a day do you find yourself checking email while talking to a client on the phone, or answering text messages while in a meeting? You may tell yourself you’re multitasking, but Levitin says multitasking is a misnomer.

“What you’re actually doing is rapidly shifting our attention from one thing to another,” he says. This fast-paced attention seesaw depletes the brain’s glucose supply. Glucose is the fuel that the brain’s neurons need to communicate with one another.

Using up the brain’s glucose supply by task switching means the brain will reach a level of fatigue much sooner in the day than if we concentrate on one item at a time with sustained attention. If that doesn’t convince you, Levitin says rapidly switching tasks also lowers your IQ by 10 points.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Evans is a freelance writer from Toronto who covers topics related to mental and physical health. She strives to help readers make small changes to their daily habits that have a profound and lasting impact on their productivity and overall job satisfaction [More](#)

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1 MINUTE READ

Editor's Note: This story is part of our feature, "Secrets of 13 of the most productive people." [See the complete 2018 list here.](#)

I have a list of priorities that I make for myself. Every day when I get to the office, I write down the top three or four things that I have to really focus on. This way, I know what I want to achieve that day.

I work a lot through email and text. I make it my goal to review what has come in and separate those that I can answer. I also always say to my team: "Please don't write me a novel, I won't read it." I just don't have the time. Instead, write in the subject line what it is that this is about. And tell me up front—is a decision needed, or do you need me to look at something, or is it a "When you have time, take a look at this"?—so I can prioritize effectively and be responsive when I need to be.

But the best tool for productivity is to have the best talent. You're never really doing it yourself.

TIME SHE GETS UP

5 a.m.

FIRST THING SHE DOES IN THE MORNING

“Coffee and water, and I’ll take a quick look at my emails. Then Jill, my spouse, and I feed the dog, the cat, the guinea pigs. We’ve got the animal kingdom.”



PLACE WHERE SHE CAN BE MOST PRODUCTIVE

“Airplane. Nobody’s talking to you, and you’re not expected at a meeting.”



SKILL SHE’S STILL WORKING ON

“Being a better listener. I come from a family of seven other children—I was the middle child. If you wanted to not eat a gizzard or neck for dinner, you best be heard right away. Now, I have to be mindful about telling myself to listen more. Because—and especially when you step into bigger roles—if you say something too quickly and don’t listen, it shuts down conversation.”

LAST THING SHE DOES AT NIGHT

“I try to [turn off] all the technology and grab a magazine, or something, to read.”

TIME SHE GOES TO BED

Between 10 and 10:30 p.m.

*A version of this article appeared in the [December 2018/January 2019](#) issue of *Fast Company* magazine.*

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