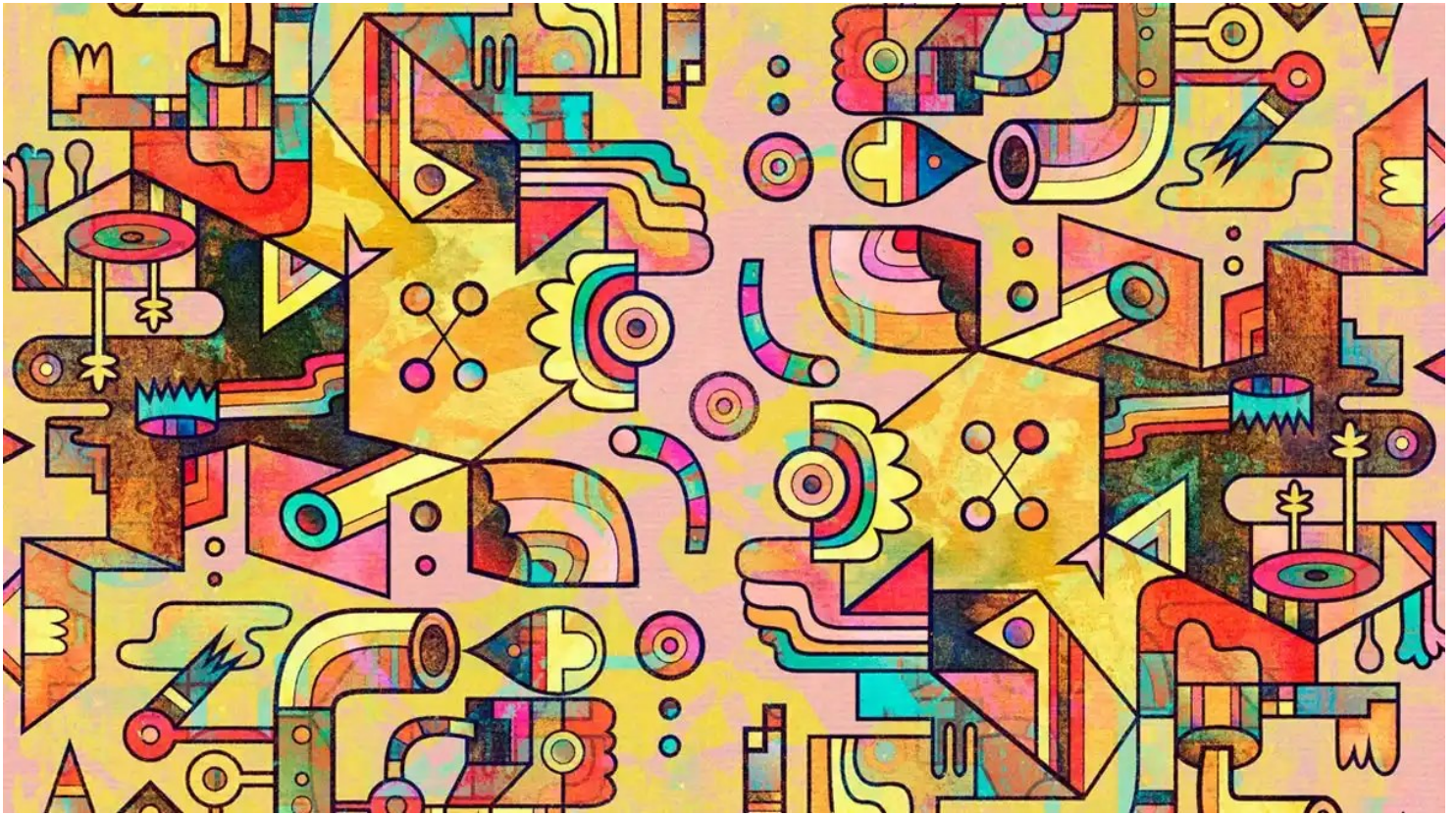


Managing Yourself

The Ways Your Brain Manages Overload, and How to Improve Them

by Srin Pillay



Summary. Information overload affects everyone, and much attention is devoted to managing it. But what most people don't realize is that your brain already employs numerous ways of coping with the deluge — it is constantly absorbing, integrating, connecting, storing, deleting, and recycling information. Better conscious use of all these functions is the key to effectively managing information overload. Simply crossing items off your to-do list, as satisfying as that may be, is a poor use of a very sophisticated machine. Instead, knowing which of the brain's functions to use, and when and how, gives you more control over your day. close

Information overload is everywhere, from non-stop news to rat-atat email inboxes. At the receiving end of this deluge of verbiage is the human brain—*your* brain— metaphorically endowed with a vacuum cleaner that sucks up information; a container for shortterm memory; a blender for integrating information; a memory bank for storing long-term information; a garbage disposal for getting rid of information; and a recycling machine extraordinaire. Using each of these functions effectively is critical if one wants to manage information overload—simply using your brain for crossing items off your to-do list is poor use of a very sophisticated machine. Yet few people build the habits and lifestyles that allow for their brains to function at their best.

At the core of managing information overload is the ability to know which function to use, and how and when to use it. The six principles below can serve as a guide to the proper brain hygiene for managing information overload on a busy work day.

Setting the vacuum cleaner: If you leave the brain's vacuum cleaner on its default setting, it will pick up every piece of information on its path. You need to fine-tune its feedback setting from “global” to “local”.

Local feedback means that you reflect on what just happened. Global feedback means that you reflect on all prior activities. Training your brain for local feedback makes it a more efficient multitasker, allowing it to manage more information and do more tasks as well. So when your day is chockfull of things to do, take a brief “unfocus” break. During that time, take stock of what you last completed to simply evaluate how it went, and how it might relate to the next task. Avoid thinking about the entire day.

Placing a filter on the container: Short-term memory is like a cup filled with ideas. It has limits. So it's especially annoying when information you don't need to remember takes up space in cup filled with ideas. It has limits. So it's especially annoying when information you don't need to remember takes up space in your memory cup or distracts you. For that reason, you need to filter information throughout the day. There are two ways in which you can do this: proactive and reactive.

TMI (“Too much information”) is a form of self-talk that constitutes *reactive* filtering. It sends a message to your brain to not absorb what you just heard. *Proactive* filtering is a kind of preparation for your brain. Rather than waiting for the TMI moment, you prepare your brain to ignore it. The ding on your Facebook page, for example, is something you can decide ahead of time to ignore, or you could turn notifications off on your computer too.

Turning the blender on: You can make space in your brain by connecting ideas. When you do, they become paired, and your brain can handle more information.

When you are focused, your brain is in *collection* and not *connection* mode. You need to build unfocus times into your day to turn your brain's connection circuits on.

When you have too much information coming your way, do the counterintuitive thing—*add* another task into your day. But let this task be something fun that turns on your connection circuits.

For example, walking gives your ideas some legs—it boosts connections and creativity. And walking *outside* beats walking on a treadmill too.

Cement your memories: Long-term memory can be made in minutes by using a technique known as spaced learning. Rather than working non-stop, build deliberate distractions into your day. It can confer huge benefits. It empties your short-term memory cup quickly. And it cements what you need to learn much faster than if you persevered with your work non-stop. This lightens the load of information deluge.

Turn on the garbage disposal: We often fear that we cannot remember things. Yet, there are also things that we cannot *forget* either. For example, a brief reprimand can stay on your mind all day long. And when you mess up too, even if nobody else knows, it can worry you too.

As we get older, we get less good at deliberate forgetting— paradoxically, troublesome memories linger longer (in part because we have a general worry about our memories fading so we automatically strain to remember.) One strategy is to substitute memories quickly. As soon as the troublesome memory starts to form, turn on your favorite music, or look up your favorite image. Calling deliberate or directed forgetting, you can effectively disrupt troublesome memories early so that they never take hold.

Activate the recycling machine: Your brain consumes 20% of the body's energy even though it only uses 2% of the body's volume. This means that when your body lacks energy, your brain will suffer too. This is probably why conditioning your body with yoga can improve your quality of life, or why exercise helps your body manage its energy more effectively. Doing either also gives your brain a break. Building time in your day to take your mind off your work will help to rejuvenate your brain. When you organize your day with these principles in mind, you will have a new, improved day *sculpted* to manage information overload. There are many more ways to build strategic unfocus into your day. But to start this exercise, simply break up your workday into 45-minute segments with 15 minutes in between each segment. Exercise at the beginning or end of your day. During your first break, do proactive filtering. In all other breaks, check in with yourself to see if anything is disturbing you. Use reactive filtering (TMI) and thought substitution (positive for negative) early.

When things start getting overwhelming, go for a walk to make connections or use local feedback control. Practice using these techniques often, and you will likely increase your brain's efficiency significantly, and you may improve your quality time at home as well.

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