

# Here's Why Feeling Overwhelmed Changes Your Behavior

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Mental exhaustion depletes your self-control, leading to increased aggressive behavior and impaired decision-making. This is demonstrated in a study involving 447 participants in cooperative gaming scenarios
- › The prefrontal cortex, which manages cognitive functions and impulse control, becomes fatigued with overuse, similar to muscles that needs rest and recovery from training
- › Mental exhaustion differs from physical tiredness, manifesting as feeling drained and overwhelmed, with symptoms like irritability and poor concentration that persist even after sleeping
- › When mentally exhausted, people become more prone to conflicts, misinterpret social cues and struggle with communication, making minor inconveniences feel like major provocations
- › Building mental resilience involves increasing healthy carbohydrate intake, cultivating positive thinking, taking regular walks and improving sleep quality

We've all been there before – after a long day at work, juggling family responsibilities or dealing with a stressful situation, we feel completely drained. This feeling of being mentally exhausted affects more than just our mood. It also significantly impacts our ability to control our impulses and emotions, leading to more aggressive behavior and decisions we normally wouldn't do.

## Understanding Self-Control – The Brain's Inner Voice

In a study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), researchers shed light on how mental exhaustion affects our brain's ability to regulate behavior.<sup>1</sup> Operating on the concept of “ego depletion,” which is the idea that willpower diminishes with constant use, they tested how “prolonged mental fatigue can weaken brain regions essential for self-control, leading people to behave more aggressively.”<sup>2</sup>

To start, researchers recruited 447 participants and subjected them to fatigue-inducing tasks for 45 minutes to wear down their ego. Afterward, they were assigned with playing games that focused on cooperative behavior. Here's what they discovered after the study was completed:<sup>3</sup>

*“Specifically, individuals who completed tasks requiring extended exertion of self-control showed a higher propensity to fight in the Hawk and Dove game relative to those who engaged in similar tasks not requiring self-control. Thus, when confronted with a situation in which agents can decide either to resolve a conflicting situation peacefully or aggressively, depleted individuals are more likely to choose the aggressive alternative.*

*In addition, fatigued participants showed a lower probability of selecting the option regarding prosocial punishment, that is, the act of punishing defectors, and an increased propensity in choosing to punish spitefully, that is, punishing another player at random.”*

According to the researchers, much of the reason why aggressive behavior increases is due to the fatigue experienced by the prefrontal cortex, located at the front of your brain.<sup>4</sup> This area is responsible for higher-level cognitive functions like decision-making, planning and impulse control.

Think of the prefrontal cortex as the conductor of an orchestra, coordinating different parts of the brain to produce harmonious actions and thoughts. When the conductor is functioning well, you effectively manage your thoughts, emotions and behaviors.

However, when you're mentally exhausted, the prefrontal cortex's ability to function is compromised.

When your mental "fuel tank" is low, your ability to exert self-control diminishes. This explains why it's harder to stay focused on a complex task after a long, mentally draining day.

Based on the results of the study, it's important to understand that willpower isn't an unlimited resource. The idea that you "power through" any challenge or obstacle is a myth. Research shows that self-control is like a muscle – it's strengthened with practice, but it also becomes fatigued with overuse.<sup>5</sup>

This means that after a day filled with making decisions, solving problems and managing stressful situations, our capacity for self-control is reduced. Recognizing this limitation is the first step toward managing your mental exhaustion. Later, I'll share strategies that will help cultivate your mental resilience.

## **When the Tank Runs Dry – Signs of Mental Exhaustion**

It's important to distinguish between physical and mental exhaustion. While physical exhaustion is characterized by muscle fatigue and tiredness, mental exhaustion manifests differently. It's often described as a feeling of being mentally drained, overwhelmed and unable to concentrate.

This is usually accompanied by emotional symptoms like irritability, apathy and a sense of hopelessness. Unlike physical tiredness, which is often alleviated with rest, mental exhaustion persists even after a good night's sleep.

Chronic stress is a major contributor to mental exhaustion.<sup>6</sup> When you experience prolonged periods of stress, your body is constantly in a state of "fight or flight," which drains your mental resources. It's like a computer running multiple demanding programs simultaneously – eventually, it will slow down and even crash.

Similarly, chronic stress overloads your mental capacity, leading to mental exhaustion. Having it drained constantly will make it difficult for you to recover and replenish your mental reserves.

Recognizing the signs of mental exhaustion is crucial for taking proactive steps to address it. In addition to irritability and feeling mentally drained, you'll find yourself snapping at loved ones over minor things, struggling to stay focused on tasks or feeling overwhelmed by everyday responsibilities. Paying attention to these warning signs will help you identify when you're approaching your limits.

## **The Conflict Connection – How Mental Exhaustion Fuels Arguments**

Mental exhaustion significantly impairs your ability to manage your emotions, making you more susceptible to conflict. Just as hunger make you “hangry,” mental fatigue make you more prone to irritation and impulsive reactions.

The PNAS study<sup>7</sup> further highlights the concept of “cognitive fatigue,” where repeated decision-making depletes our mental resources, leading to poorer choices and increased irritability. This effect makes you more likely to overreact to small issues and escalate disagreements.

When you're mentally exhausted, your tolerance for frustration decreases. Small inconveniences that you normally brush off become major triggers for anger and frustration. It's like waiting in a long line at the grocery store after a particularly stressful day at work – someone cutting in your line is normally a minor annoyance, but when you're mentally drained, it feels like the last straw, which could lead to an angry outburst.

Mental exhaustion also affects your communication skills. It's possible for you to misinterpret others' words or actions, miss important social cues and even struggle to express yourself clearly. This leads to misunderstandings and escalate conflicts unnecessarily. For example, a simple question from a partner after a long day will be perceived as criticism, leading to an argument.

When you find yourself in a confrontational situation and you recognize that you're feeling mentally exhausted, it's important to employ de-escalation strategies – taking a deep breath, stepping away from the situation temporarily or communicating your feelings calmly will help prevent escalation. It's also important to recognize when you need to postpone a conversation until you're feeling more rested and able to communicate effectively.

## **Recharging and Rebuilding – Starter Strategies for Greater Self-Control**

Giving your mental health time to wind down is essential for building and maintaining self-control. This includes engaging in activities that help you relax, recharge and manage stress. Scheduling regular mental breaks throughout the day will help improve your ability to manage stress and maintain focus. Just as your phone needs regular charging to function optimally, your brain needs regular breaks to recharge.

Taking short breaks to stretch, walk around or simply close your eyes will help restore mental energy and improve concentration. Even five-minute breaks will already make a significant difference in your overall mental well-being.

Learning to say “no” to additional commitments and delegating tasks when possible (both at work and at home) are essential skills for managing mental exhaustion. Overcommitting yourself leads to chronic stress and depletes your mental resources. Recognizing your limits and setting boundaries helps you avoid feeling overwhelmed. By implementing these strategies, you'll be able to achieve a more balanced and manageable lifestyle.

## **Four Additional Tips to Improve Your Mental Resilience**

Developing mental resilience will help, but don't expect to get results overnight. According to Michèle Wessa, Ph.D., resilience is something that happens very gradually

— not an hour after taking a training program.<sup>8</sup> So, in addition to the tips I discussed earlier, here are four key strategies to help build a stronger mind:

- **Increase your carb intake** — As the saying goes, “you are what you eat.” And to help build mental resilience, the first and foremost actionable strategy is increasing your intake of healthy carbs to help lower your cortisol levels, which is both a stress and an aging hormone.

According to Raffael Kalisch, Ph.D., a neuroscientist at the Leibniz Institute for Resilience Research, “The key to resilience is staying healthy even when faced with life’s burdens.”<sup>9</sup> And given the ramifications of cortisol on mental health, it’s crucial to eat a carb-rich diet from nutritious sources so that your body no longer creates its own glucose via raising cortisol levels.

Again, focus on eating healthy carbohydrates as your main energy source. They’re better than fats because they generate less reactive oxygen species in your mitochondria. While fats are healthy, eating too much of them will hamper carb metabolism, so it’s important to lower your fat intake to less than 30% of your daily calories.

For a detailed explanation on how carbs are the ideal fuel and can help reduce cortisol levels, read my article [“Key Strategies to Reduce Your Cortisol Levels.”](#)

- **Cultivate positive thinking** — Having trouble being more optimistic? Just like training your willpower, optimism is a skill that’s cultivated and honed. Dr. Sue Varma, a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at New York University, advises visualizing the best outcome, then creating a detailed step-by-step path to achieve it.

This approach fosters positive behavior, resilience and the ability to bounce back from life’s challenges. But this is not the only way for you to foster optimism.<sup>10</sup>

If you’ve been meaning to learn a new skill, you’ll be able to cultivate optimism this way, too. Simply pick an activity that you’ve been putting off for years now, such as

learning a new sport or playing a musical instrument. Doing this will fill your mind with positive experiences because you're learning something new.

- **Take a walk outside** — In a study published in GeroScience, researchers noted the importance of getting regular physical activity in promoting healthy aging and longevity. Specifically, they focused on walking, stating it's more than just a basic exercise — it's also a potent antiaging strategy.<sup>11</sup> But that's not all, as it helps boost sleep quality and cognitive function.

Interestingly, those are not the most notable findings. The researchers also observed that walking helps rejuvenate your mitochondrial health, and as you can imagine, optimal mitochondrial function is important for both physical and mental health.<sup>12</sup>

What is the optimal number of steps a day to maintain your health? Based on the findings of a 2023 study, 8,000 steps once or twice a week significantly lowers your all-cause and cardiovascular mortality risk, especially when done every day.<sup>13</sup> In [my interview with cardiologist Dr. James O'Keefe](#), he noted that you can get the most out of walking by doing it consistently, as it's a moderate-intensity exercise that cannot be overdone:

*"Clearly, more is better. You get the big gains going from sedentary lifestyles — 2,000 to 3,000 steps a day — up to 7,000 or 8,000. [Here] you have this very steep reduction in mortality, improvement in survival. It continues to about 12,000 steps a day. Most of the studies show that it plateaus at 12,000."*

- **Improve your sleep quality** — Sleep is a cornerstone of optimal health, and getting consistent quality rest will help strengthen your mental resilience. In a PLoS One study, researchers observed that sleep quality was tied to anxiety.<sup>14</sup>

To test the hypothesis, the team gathered 127 college students and used a combination of qualitative models to explore the link between sleep quality and the

progression of anxiety, which subsequently affects the mental resilience of the participants.

After analysis, the researchers observed that poor sleep quality influences the onset of anxiety. Moreover, participants who already had strong mental resilience at the beginning of the study coped better from the effects of poor sleep and were able to become more optimistic again.<sup>15</sup>

Now, how do you improve your sleep quality? First, eliminate all light from your bedroom by using special curtains. If that's out of your budget, a well-fitted sleep mask is a practical alternative.

Removing all sources of electromagnetic fields (EMFs) will also help. Turn off your Wi-Fi at night, and remove all digital devices (including alarm clocks) away from your room, replacing them with analog clocks. For additional tips, read my article [“Sleep Problems? Gardening May Help.”](#)

## Sources and References

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- <sup>5</sup> [Psychol Bull. 2010 Jul;136\(4\):495-525](#)
- <sup>6</sup> [Physiol Rev. 2007 Jul;87\(3\):873-904](#)
- <sup>8, 9</sup> [Youtube, DW Documentary, Mental Health and Resilience – The Secrets of Inner Strength](#)
- <sup>10</sup> [WUSF NPR, June 16, 2024](#)
- <sup>11</sup> [GeroScience. 2023 Dec; 45\(6\): 3211-3239, Abstract](#)
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