

Health alert!

Burnout

There's a reason you have trouble remembering basic things like what you ate for lunch or where you parked your car. It's called brain fog and it's being reported by more young people than ever (especially you overachievers).

This is the curse of the overachiever: between acing exams, landing a dream job, maintaining a social life, staying in shape and grooming your Instagram feed, it can often feel as though being stressed is your steady state. Your to-do lists grow, while days seem shorter. And no matter how much you excel at multitasking, the tension feels like it's building. That's because it is, according to a recent survey conducted by the Psychological Association. Millennials are more burnt out than ever before – and it may have something to do with the recent uptick in a condition some researchers are calling 'brain fog'.

Shorthand for mental cloudiness, brain fog has long been associated with conditions like fibromyalgia and Alzheimer's, but now teens and 20-somethings are reporting feelings of mental confusion and sluggishness similar to those more commonly observed in older generations. "It's common, but definitely not normal," notes Dr Robert Lahita, a professor of medicine. So what's the catalyst?

A host of triggers all point to increased pressures specific to this generation, like the climbing cost of higher education, a changing job market in which it isn't as simple as graduating and getting a job, and a fraught political climate, says

Dr Mike Dow, a psychotherapist and the author of *Heal Your Drained Brain* (Hay House; R427). Another culprit? Social media, which has led to an inflated sense of perfectionism among millennials. While it may not be conscious, seeing celebrities', influencers' – even certain friends' – lives on Instagram may have recalibrated the goals you've set for yourself. "Perfection is a high bar. No one can achieve that daily," adds Dr Dow.

"If everything you eat comes in a cardboard box or a crinkly bag, you have a problem."
– Amanda Rausch

If it feels like you're in a game of pinball all day, you're not imagining things. "While focusing on an important task, our brains can't filter out extraneous stimuli, which inhibits concentration," Dr Dow explains. Just as your iPhone tends to slow down if you have too many apps open, our brains can't fully focus if there are too many things that require our attention at once.

Also, taking on more responsibilities typically leads to an impossible schedule. Many are chugging caffeinated drinks – or worse, misusing friends' prescription stimulants to stay up crazy late, then waking up at the crack of dawn to get more done. This attempt at hyper-productivity ends up backfiring. "This interferes with your body's natural sleep cycle," says Dr Dow. "It can give you mental jet lag, like flying from Joburg to Cairo daily." Keeping a regular bedtime can curb brain fog and actually make your waking hours more effective.

Certain nutritional habits can make you feel fuzzy, too. Processed food and dehydration play a role, so drink plenty of water, and eat fruits and veggies. Most important, keep anxiety in check by unplugging from your phone for an hour each day – stress buildup can result in total confusion and impede performance. Here's how it works: when we're stressed out, our brains experience an upsurge in cortisol (the stress hormone) and a depletion of feel-good chemicals, like serotonin and dopamine, leaving us unmotivated to decipher dizzying thoughts. You can avoid this by prioritising time to exercise and meditate. Once you slow down and take a step back, you might just start feeling sharper, even smarter.



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Mental health break
Here's a short checklist of warning signs that your work-life balance is out of whack.

In our busy world, many people – especially women – are endlessly striving to meet the demands of school and work. According to Amanda Rausch, a licensed marriage and family therapist, signs of burnout can include feeling exhausted or irritable and being unable to see the big picture. (If you've ever snapped over something totally stupid, you might blame brain fog.) "It already feels like there are not enough hours in the day," she says, "so we can't imagine taking some time to breathe. But if we don't, burnout is inevitable." If the following scenarios sound like you, it may be time to reassess your lifestyle.

You talk only about work

When you find yourself chatting about the office, ask your convo partner about their cat, bring up news headlines, muse about what Rihanna wore that day. Anything to give your mind a break.

You're pulling disappearing acts

If the people in your life are wondering where you went, set up check-ins with friends and family whom you trust to bring you back down to earth. Relationships suffer when work comes first.

Memories of muscles are all you have left

Even lifting small weights at your desk, going for a short run after work or doing a yoga video in the morning can help you turn things around.

Every night is a 'late night'

Healthy, productive days are made possible by a solid night's sleep. Close your laptop at an earlier hour, and cosy up to those zzz's.

It's been weeks since you've seen a vegetable

Taking care means nourishing your body with healthy meals. Ponder your recent diet: if everything you eat comes in a cardboard box or a crinkly bag, you have a problem. ➔



From burnout to breakthrough

At 24, Daniella Shapiro, founder of skincare brand the Oolala Collection, battled burnout.

Marketing graduate and successful business woman Daniella Shapiro's overachiever, Type A personality resulted in her doing way more than her body could endure. She eventually found herself going from the super athlete who summited Mount Kilimanjaro to a mere shadow of her former self, unable to even get out of bed in the morning.

How did she pave her way back to good health? Here are the steps she took to recover.

Holistic healing

Focused on healing her mind, body and soul in the most holistic way possible, Daniella found an incredible homeopath, reflexologist and physio who helped her on her journey. "I made healing my full-time job, and I knew that having a dedicated team of healers around me would expedite the process," she explains.

Being more mindful

Daniella's mindset has been the most important part of remaining balanced. "Life will always be full of challenges and stress, so whenever I'm feeling off balance, I immediately become more present and aware of how I feel and why," she explains. "The healing process is not a once-off thing, I work on it daily. I run every morning, enjoy boxing and yoga, and only eat brain food."

The art of saying "no"

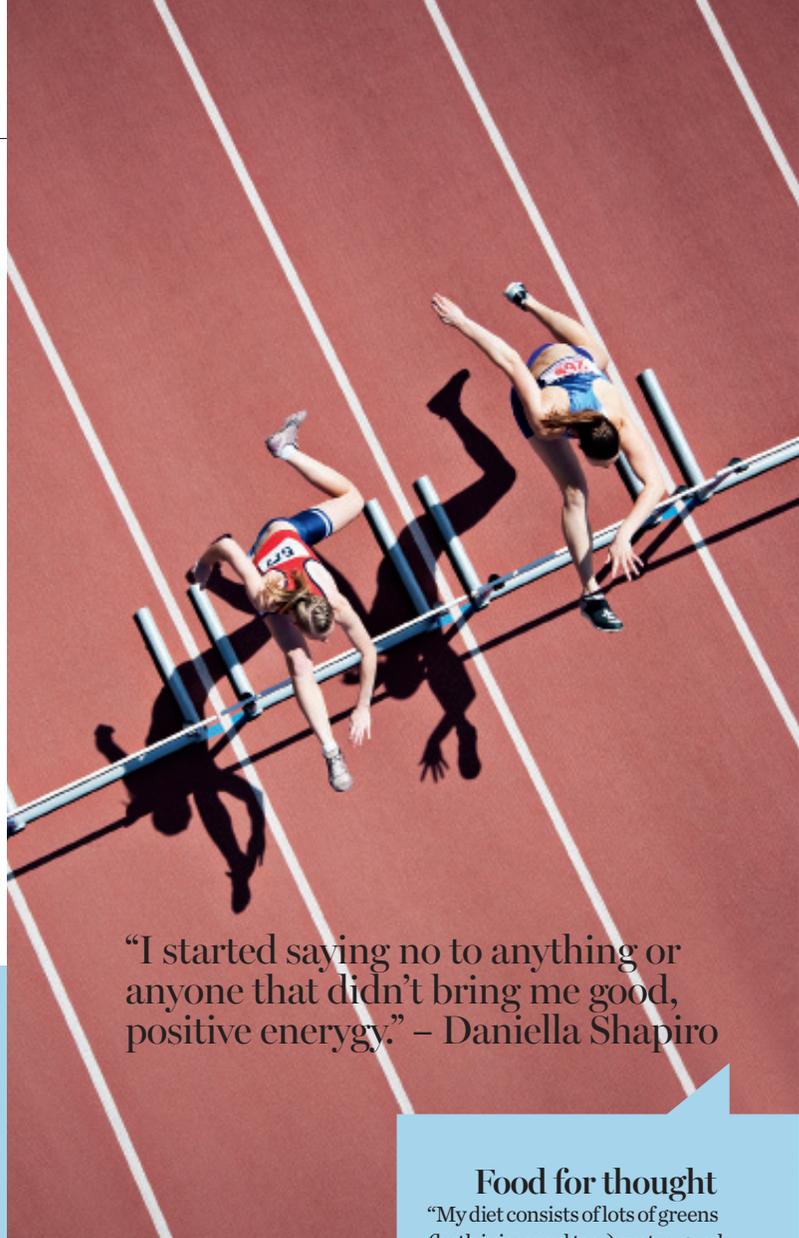
"I started saying no to anything or anyone that didn't bring me good, positive energy; I delegated where I could to make things easier and more productive; I questioned and reprioritised my values, and all the little decisions that lead me to burnout because I was now thinking of nurturing my soul."

"I started saying no to anything or anyone that didn't bring me good, positive energy." – Daniella Shapiro

Food for thought

"My diet consists of lots of greens (both juices and teas), water, good proteins, and salads with avo and steamed veggies," she adds. She also included critical supplements from her homeopath: Chelated Magnesium (believed to increase energy and heal wounds), L-Tyrosine (an anti-stressor that is used to produce dopamine), Pantothenic Acid (an energy-booster) and a daily probiotic.

"I came back from burnout and I've accomplished more now than I'd ever imagined was possible," says Daniella. "Launching the Oolala Collection (oolalacollection.com) skincare line was the birth of a dream that came to being through my most challenging of times."



Text: Tina Ferraro, Allii Maloney, Yolisa Mjamba; Photography: Gallo Images/Getty Images, Mike Turner Photography