



Five reasons your brain hurts right now

We've all experienced more change in the last few months than many of us have faced in years – maybe even in our lifetimes. Our sense of belonging has been fundamentally disrupted. Our tribes are dispersing and reforming far faster than we're used to. It has been a very difficult time for almost everyone.

If you're feeling exhausted and overwhelmed at the moment, you are by no means alone. Here are just some of the reasons your brain hurts.

1. Your brain is not designed for now

There are two distinctly different ways life has evolved on planet earth. The most obvious is genetics, which is glacially slow. The other is culture - the ability to pass on ideas, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. We're stuck with our genes, but we can choose from an ever-increasing supply of new ideas that jump from one mind to another instantly. The problem is that our genetic evolution has not, in any way, kept pace with our cultural evolution. Our brains are not designed for the world we have created for ourselves - virtual reality, social media, immersive online gaming, PowerPoint presentations, options trading. They're designed for 80,000 years ago when our biggest challenge was whether or not we were about to be eaten by a lion. We're living in the perfect storm of overwhelm.

2. Your brain is a threat detection machine

Our brains are threat detection, pattern recognition machines designed for only one purpose – to keep us alive. They do this by ensuring we notice anything that is a threat, or might become a threat, before we notice anything else. Right now we're facing a very real threat from COVID-19 and pretty much every brain on earth is on high alert – this creates extra cortisol (the stress hormone) which interferes with our thinking processes, sleep, digestion and relationships. Just when we need all those things to work well.

3. Your brain can't tell the difference between social and physical pain

Matthew Lieberman heads the Social Cognitive Neuroscience Lab at UCLA's Department of Psychology, Psychiatry and Biobehavioural Science. His ground-breaking work has proven

that our brains interpret physical pain and social pain in exactly the same way. When we experience the social pain of feeling excluded, our brains respond as if we had been physically injured. Right now many of us are being excluded from our workplaces, our social groups, our families. That social exclusion hurts. Not metaphorically, literally.

4. You have to do the opposite of what your brain wants

As the ultimate social species, humans are hardwired to stay safe through belonging and connection. When there's a threat detected, our brains are silently screaming at us 'if you don't belong to a group you will die'. But right now we all know the best way to stay safe is to stay apart, which is the exact opposite of what our brains want, so we're experiencing an intensely unsettling period of cognitive dissonance.

5. Your brain is exhausted by interacting via screens

Your sub-conscious knows what my pulse rate is doing when we're face to face. Our brains are very busy reading micro-expressions, analysing pheromones and doing countless other jobs when we're physically close together. On the other side of a screen, none of that works, so we have to consciously process vastly increased amounts of information to read the emotions of the person we're talking to. We also have a camera locked on to our faces which makes us feel far more heavily and intrusively 'observed' than when we're sitting together in a meeting room or a café. It's exhausting to feel like we're under a microscope and need to 'perform' for hours at a time. And just for added fun, we're also staring at a moving image of ourselves, which is distracting and just plain weird.



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