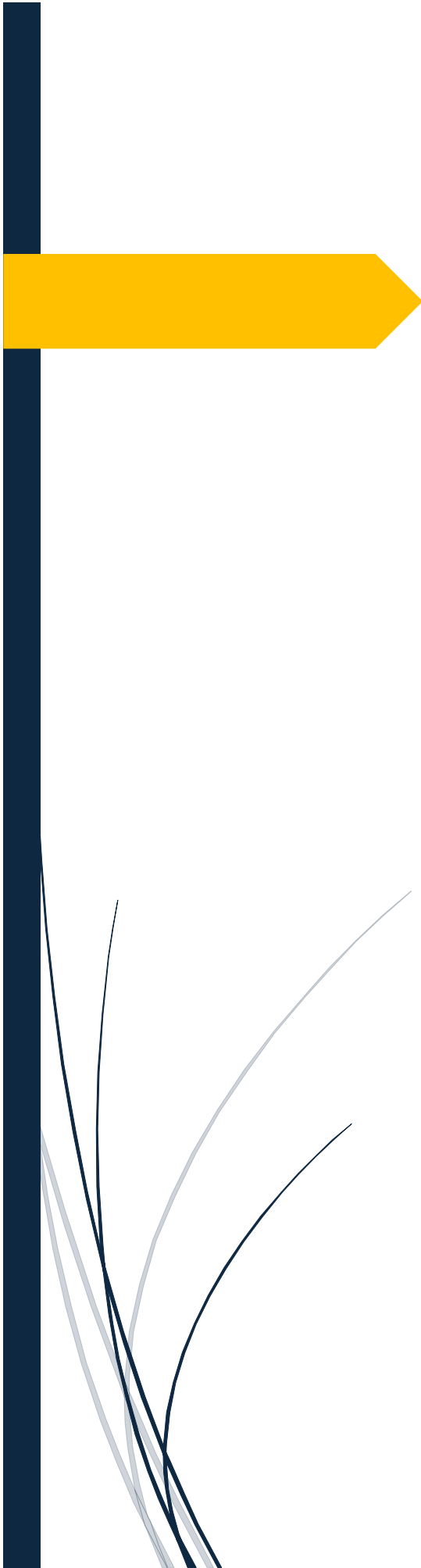




Always On

When Your Brain Is Always
Looking for What's Next

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Some brains seem to be constantly looking for something. Something to do. Something to think about. Something to solve. Something to check. Something to listen to. Something to look forward to. Something new. Something next.

You finish one task and immediately start another. You sit down to watch television and pick up your phone.

You drive while listening to a podcast and still feel the urge to check something. You finally have nothing you *have* to do and somehow doing nothing feels uncomfortable.

Your brain says: **What's next?** This doesn't necessarily mean anything is wrong.

Some people naturally seek more novelty, activity, challenge, movement, information, or stimulation than others. ADHD and other neurodivergent experiences can contribute. So can personality, habits, work demands, technology, stress, and simply living in an environment where stimulation is available almost constantly.

The goal isn't to turn an active brain into a quiet brain.

It's to become better at recognizing: **What does my brain need right now?**

Your Brain as a Stimulation Dial

Think about stimulation as a dial rather than an ON/OFF switch.

UNDERSTIMULATED

- Bored
- Restless
- Uninterested
- Distracted
- Unmotivated
- Searching for something
- Difficulty staying with low-interest tasks

ENGAGED

- Alert
- Interested
- Present
- Focused
- Flexible
- Able to stay with something
- Able to shift when needed

OVERSTIMULATED

- Scattered
- Irritable
- Mentally noisy
- Difficulty prioritizing
- Too many things competing for attention
- Difficulty transitioning
- Exhausted but unable to stop
- Wanting stimulation while simultaneously feeling overwhelmed by it

The goal isn't to stay perfectly in the middle. Your needs will change throughout the day. Sometimes you need **more** stimulation. Sometimes **less**. Sometimes you don't need more or less.

You need **different**.

Some Brains Need More Input

For some people, low-stimulation situations can be surprisingly difficult.

- Routine work.
- Waiting.
- Sitting through meetings.
- Driving familiar routes.
- Household chores.
- Paperwork.
- Quiet evenings.
- Tasks without urgency.
- Tasks without novelty.
- Tasks without immediate feedback.

The brain starts searching.

- **Can I put something on?**
- **Can I check something?**
- **Can I do something else at the same time?**
- **Is there anything more interesting?**

This can be particularly familiar for people with ADHD, but you don't need ADHD to recognize the experience.

Some brains simply become very practiced at finding ways to stay engaged.

Overstimulation Doesn't Always Look Overwhelmed

When we hear *overstimulated*, we may imagine someone covering their ears in a loud room.

That is one form of overstimulation. But there are different kinds of input.

SENSORY

- Noise
- Lights
- Crowds
- Movement
- Touch
- Screens
- Multiple conversations

COGNITIVE

- Ideas
- Tasks
- Projects
- Planning
- Problem-solving
- Decisions
- Information
- Notifications
- Mental lists
- Open loops

EMOTIONAL

- Conflict
- Worry
- Responsibility
- Other people's needs
- Uncertainty
- Anticipation

- Pressure

DIGITAL

- Messages
- News
- Social media
- Videos
- Email
- Games
- Apps
- Alerts
- Constant access to information

You can be sitting completely still while your brain is processing an enormous amount of input.

A resting body doesn't necessarily mean a resting brain.

When "High Functioning" Is Also "Always On"

Constant stimulation doesn't always look like a problem. Sometimes it looks productive.

- You work hard.
- Solve problems.
- Learn quickly.
- Start projects.
- Listen to podcasts.
- Research ideas.
- Exercise.
- Plan trips.
- Manage people.
- Read.
- Build.
- Create.
- Stay informed.

People may even admire your ability to keep going. But productivity can make it harder to notice when your brain has become accustomed to **always having something happening**.

You may not notice until things finally get quiet.

Then suddenly:

- **I'm bored.**
- **I should be doing something.**
- **Let me check my phone.**
- **Maybe I'll work on that project.**
- **I wonder what's happening online.**

What's next?

Sometimes the challenge isn't being unable to relax. Your brain may simply have become **very practiced at finding the next input**.

Boredom Isn't an Emergency

Boredom creates an urge. **Find something.** That urge isn't necessarily a problem.

Boredom can tell us that we need engagement, novelty, movement, challenge, connection, or purpose. But boredom doesn't always require an immediate response. When every small moment of boredom gets filled, we lose opportunities to experience lower levels of stimulation.

- Waiting in line? Phone.
- Commercial? Phone.
- Walking? Podcast.
- Driving? Music.
- Cooking? Video.
- Getting into bed? Scroll.
- Bathroom? Phone.

None of those behaviors is inherently bad. The question is whether you still have a **choice**. **BORED → FIND SOMETHING** can become: **BORED → NOTICE → CHOOSE**

Sometimes you'll still choose stimulation. The difference is that you're choosing it rather than automatically reaching for it.

More Isn't Always What You Need

When you're understimulated, adding stimulation can help.

- Music while doing chores.
- Movement during work.
- Changing environments.
- Working alongside someone.
- Adding challenge.
- Turning a task into a game.
- Taking a walk.
- Doing something with your hands.

But there is a trap. When the brain gets used to solving discomfort with: **MORE** it may continue adding stimulation even after stimulation has stopped helping.

- One screen becomes two.
- One task becomes four.
- Music becomes music + phone + email.
- A break becomes scrolling.
- Relaxing becomes finding another project.

Eventually: **UNDERSTIMULATED → MORE → MORE → MORE → OVERSTIMULATED** The solution isn't necessarily: **MORE → NOTHING**

Sometimes it's: **MORE → DIFFERENT** or **MORE → LESS**

When Stimulation Becomes Reward Seeking

Sometimes the brain isn't simply looking for stimulation. It's looking for **reward, anticipation, relief, excitement, novelty, or escape**.

That can come from many places:

- Exercise.
- Food.
- Shopping.
- Gaming.
- Social media.
- Sexual content.
- Work.
- New projects.
- Risk-taking.

- Alcohol or other substances.
- Gambling or sports betting.
- Conflict or drama.
- Constantly checking messages.

These behaviors aren't equal in risk. But they can sometimes serve a similar function: **Change how I feel right now.** That's worth noticing.

The NEXT Loop

Sometimes the anticipation becomes part of the reward.

- What's the next video?
- Did someone message me?
- What's the score?
- Should I place another bet?
- What's happening online?
- Should I buy it?
- Should I have another drink?
- What's the next project?

The pattern can become: **SEEK → ANTICIPATE → REWARD / RELIEF → REPEAT → SEEK**

Eventually, the reward itself may become less satisfying while the pull toward **the next one** remains strong. That's when it's worth asking: **Am I enjoying this or am I chasing what's next?**

Not All Stimulation Costs the Same

Instead of dividing stimulation into: **GOOD** and **BAD** try asking two questions:

WHAT DOES THIS GIVE ME?

- Interest?
- Energy?
- Relief?
- Connection?
- Novelty?
- Excitement?
- Escape?
- Focus?
- Comfort?
- Something to anticipate?

Then ask:

WHAT DOES THIS COST ME?

- Time?
- Sleep?
- Money?
- Attention?
- Energy?
- Health?
- Relationships?
- Responsibilities?
- Presence?
- Control?

The goal isn't to eliminate rewarding experiences.

It's to notice when the **cost begins exceeding the benefit.**

When the Loop May Be Taking Over

Pay attention when you notice: **NEEDING MORE**

What used to satisfy you doesn't seem like enough.

HARD TO STOP

- *"One more"* regularly becomes several more.

AUTOMATIC REACHING

- You find yourself checking, scrolling, eating, drinking, buying, betting, gaming, or switching activities before you've consciously decided to.

USING IT TO CHANGE YOUR STATE

- Bored → scroll.
- Stressed → drink.
- Lonely → shop.
- Restless → gamble.
- Uncomfortable → find something intense.

INCREASING COSTS

- Sleep, money, relationships, health, work, attention, or responsibilities begin suffering.

ORDINARY THINGS FEEL TOO BORING

- Lower-stimulation activities become increasingly difficult to tolerate.

HIDING OR MINIMIZING

- You conceal or minimize the amount of time, money, frequency, or consequences involved.

"I SHOULD CUT BACK, BUT..."

- You repeatedly intend to change the behavior but keep returning to it.

These aren't reasons for shame. They're reasons to **pay attention**.

Some patterns particularly involving alcohol, substances, gambling, or other behaviors that are becoming difficult to control may warrant additional professional support rather than simply trying harder to self-regulate.

What Are You Actually Looking For?

Before automatically adding stimulation, get curious.

Maybe you need:

- **STIMULATION** = I need engagement.
- **REWARD** = I want something enjoyable.
- **RELIEF** = I want this internal state to change.
- **ESCAPE** = I don't want to be with what's happening right now.
- **MOVEMENT** = My body needs activity.
- **CONNECTION** = I need interaction with another person.
- **CHALLENGE** = My brain needs something interesting to work on.
- **RECOVERY** = I've had enough input.

The behavior may look the same from the outside. The need underneath it can be very different.

And different needs require different responses.

Diversify Your Stimulation

If your brain likes stimulation, give it options. Don't make one or two behaviors responsible for changing your internal state every time. Build a larger menu.

PHYSICAL

- | | | |
|--------|------------------------|-------------------|
| • Walk | • Stretch | • Clean |
| • Lift | • Sports | • Build something |
| • Run | • Work with your hands | |

CREATIVE

- | | | |
|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| • Cook | • Play music | • Create something |
| • Draw | • Photography | |
| • Write | • Garden | |

COGNITIVE

- | | | |
|---------|------------------------|-------------------|
| • Read | • Build | • Explore an idea |
| • Learn | • Plan | |
| • Solve | • Play a strategy game | |

SOCIAL

- | | | |
|-----------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| • Call someone | • Play a game | • Spend time around other people |
| • Meet a friend | • Join an activity | |

SENSORY

- Music
- Shower
- Nature
- Sunlight
- Movement
- Change environments

LOWER INPUT

- Sit outside
- Drive without audio
- Walk without your phone
- Cook without additional media
- Do one thing at a time
- Let yourself wait

Not every option needs to be calming. The goal is **range**.

Practice Changing the Input

If your brain is used to a lot of stimulation, going directly from: **HIGH → NOTHING** may feel miserable.

Try: **HIGH → MEDIUM → LOW**

For example:

- ⇓ Scrolling + television + texting
- ⇓ One television show
- ⇓ Music while cooking
- ⇓ Walk outside
- ⇓ Shower
- ⇓ Quiet

You're not punishing your brain. You're helping it practice **shifting gears**.

One Thing Can Be Enough

Try occasionally removing the extra layer.

- Watch the movie without your phone.
- Walk without a podcast.
- Eat without scrolling.
- Drive without constantly changing what's playing.
- Talk with someone without checking notifications.
- Cook with music but without the phone.
- Work with one task visible instead of six.

You're not trying to live this way all the time. You're reminding your brain: **One source of stimulation can sometimes be enough**.

DO MORE / DO LESS

DO MORE

- Notice your current stimulation level.
- Learn what understimulation feels like for you.
- Learn what overstimulation feels like for you.
- Ask what need is underneath the urge for more.
- Use movement and physical activity to regulate.
- Change the **type** of stimulation instead of automatically adding more.
- Build multiple ways to engage your brain.
- Practice doing one thing at a time.
- Create small periods of lower input.
- Notice the costs and benefits of high-reward behaviors.
- Get curious when "one more" repeatedly becomes several more.
- Seek support when a reward-seeking behavior becomes difficult to control.

DO LESS

- Treating boredom like an emergency.
- Assuming every restless feeling requires more input.
- Layering stimulation automatically.
- Using your phone to fill every empty moment.
- Confusing productivity with regulation.
- Expecting an active brain to suddenly enjoy complete stillness.
- Relying on one behavior to regulate every internal state.
- Ignoring increasing costs because the behavior still feels rewarding.
- Assuming you need to become a "calm person."
- Judging yourself for having a brain that needs engagement.

The Bottom Line

Some brains naturally want more stimulation. Others become accustomed to it. And many move between both experiences. The goal isn't to eliminate stimulation.

It isn't to make yourself enjoy sitting silently. And it isn't to turn an energetic, curious, creative, ambitious, or neurodivergent brain into a different kind of brain.

The goal is to develop **range**. To recognize when you need: **MORE. LESS. DIFFERENT.**

or sometimes...**NOTHING YET.** So the next time your brain asks: **What's next?** Try asking: **What do I actually need right now?** That's a different question. And it gives you more choices.