

Overstimulation

“I Have No Time”

by

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Causes, prevention, and cure

Overstimulation is epidemic in our times. Almost everyone suffers from it to some degree. It is not even possible for every person to seek treatment from his/her physician for this problem and, fortunately in less severe cases, treatment is also not really necessary. In this article we will go into the causes of this terrible and escalating malady of our times and hopefully shed new light on the search for self-healing.

Symptoms of overstimulation

Overstimulated people often get carried away by sense impressions and thoughts without really being able to connect to them. But anything that does not have one's full attention is easily forgotten, so difficulty with concentration is followed by forgetfulness. Instead, other thoughts or pictures come to the mind without any desire to remember them. Strong, but poorly assimilated impressions, as they are daily thrust into our lives, can disturb overstimulated people even in their dreams while sleeping. The senses themselves become oversensitive. Involuntary movements of the limbs, startled reactions to noises, increased rate of one's own body processes such as the pulsing of the blood and the beating of the heart, become more prevalent. All of these symptoms combine with a general irritability and agitation that can escalate into anger. Temporary relief comes through fatigue and slumber, but without any real rejuvenating sleep, naturally, such people become afraid of new impressions, of life, and they become insecure and indecisive. Overstimulation can take a tight grip on the entire life of the soul in thinking, feeling, and willing.

Many problems that occur from the pressures of living together stem from overstimulation and the resultant nervousness that arises. People would be more willing and able to understand each another if only they did not “get on each other's nerves.” Often we are not able to give sufficient attention to another person, to even listen properly to someone else. We are too quickly

exasperated by togetherness. We do harm to others with our own anger and agitation. The others are either crushed by their own insecurity or they lash back in anger.

Causes of overstimulation and nervousness

The nerves are extensions of our sense organs. They bring impressions to the brain which are then stored in memory to be processed by thought. Just like the sense organs, the nerves and the brain do not have a lot of rejuvenating power; their cells do not reproduce after birth. Dull, organic life must withdraw within the sense-nervous system so that the conscious soul-spiritual life can develop. There is constant disintegration in the nervous system during the gathering of sense perceptions and the unfolding of thought. We feel the sum of these processes of decay as fatigue and weakened abilities of concentration. During the long rest of sleep our nervous system that was “ruined” during the day is regenerated using the energy in our blood and organs such as the heart and liver. In this way sleep is the great healer.

However, this regeneration takes place in wakeful periods as well, but in a more delicate manner. For example, we use the blood’s energy to regenerate rhodopsin in the retinas of the eyes that is destroyed by each impression of light. Just as the sense organs and nerves must be constantly nourished with blood, so must our perceptions and thoughts be constantly filled with the soul energy of blood, which is feeling and willing. Otherwise, the disintegration process would gain the upper hand, even in regard to our mental capacities. This is what happens in the case of overstimulation.

Just think of people living in large cities! They are exposed night and day to a cacophony of disconnected, undesired impressions that tax the nervous systems beyond the disintegration process already taking place. They can not follow the street noise with attentive interest, the thousand impulses of light, or the buzz of voices, even though all of these impressions lay claim to their nerve tracts. In the home people become oblivious to the radio’s volume or allow the sensations on the television screen to shower over them. The fight for existence in the workplace does not allow hurried people to find any relaxation, not even during breaks. From there it is only a small step to the habitual use of sedatives, tranquilizers, and sleeping medications of all kinds. Unfortunately, these only bring temporary relief from suffering and may leave us with an addiction that will, in time, seriously endanger our health and well-being. Work may also become an addiction into which the overstimulated person can flee to forget about his inner emptiness and restlessness. But the outer busyness can not hide the fact that the inner passivity of the soul becomes ever stronger and the ego’s ability to lead one’s life becomes ever weaker.

In the background of this situation we see the flattening of religion, the instability of our morals, and the strife that is a hallmark of modern society. Sober-mindedness and conviction of spirit, former wells of strength, are ebbing away. The human ‘I’ finds it increasingly difficult or impossible to

get the appropriate nourishment. It is no wonder that a nervous person, whose 'I' is "no longer on board" with its impressions, becomes agitated and irritable.

In contrast, a healthy, relaxed person actively takes in his or her environment. Loving interest quickens an attentive gaze; the strength of will present in the 'I' controls the rise of memories and does not allow thoughts to bounce here and there. 'I' want to perceive or grasp something; 'I' complete a thought process. Our thoughts become internally colorful and rich, but only if they are accompanied by feelings; otherwise they are gray and monotone. All of this provides the prerequisite conditions for our nervous system to be properly supplied with air and blood, and to be healthy.

We find the opposite occurring in overstimulated people. Perceptions and thoughts are not "well-circulated" with feelings and will; the gaze is unsteady, and concentrated thought is not possible. The experiences of the 'I' are controlled and weakened by superficiality and disquiet. The whole picture of the world that the person wishes to maintain is threatened with breaking down into tiny pieces. From a physical standpoint, the sense-nerve system becomes one-sided and the disintegration processes already present normally gain the upper hand. This leads to oversensitivity to the outside world, to the processes in one's own body, as well as increasing insomnia as a result of abnormal hyper-alertness. Serious physical ailments often result.

Overstimulation and illness

An overstimulated person's superficial attitude about experiences can lead to physical consequences. Experiences that do not penetrate the surface of consciousness become burdensome to the unconscious soul life when they are forgotten, just like half-digested food in the stomach. Poorly "digested" experiences can result in physical problems in the digestive tract that affect the stomach, but even more so the liver. The many feelings of discord and ill humor of overstimulated people originate in the liver and can escalate into depression. Beginning with nervousness, we now have a mental illness that is connected to organ dysfunction but has its root cause in the superficiality of one's soul life.

Most of all, it is the nervous system of overstimulated people that is in danger of sickening. When the nervous system becomes over-taxed and one-sided, then the already mentioned disintegration proceeds. Regeneration lessens and degeneration, the destruction of nerve substance, takes over. This degeneration is the beginning of many nervous diseases, especially those that are prevalent today. For instance, we find in this category the atrophy of the brain in the form of Alzheimer's disease in which the nerve cells self-destruct. This disease is accompanied by progressive speech and personality disintegration. When the blood vessels in the brain calcify, then the brain is no longer getting enough blood, and for this reason it degenerates. With multiple sclerosis, the most common chronic disease of the nervous system today, the question arises if perhaps the disintegration occurred at the

beginning and the infection followed. The degenerated tissue becomes foreign matter and the body tries to deal with it just as it does with all foreign substances. Through the infection, the blood tries to dissolve the decayed place in the nervous system.

Some of the symptoms that appear with such diseases, such as heightened hyper-alertness and irritability, could be seen as an escalation of what has already been described with overstimulation. The picture of the world that the person with a nervous system disease had tried to make is now completely disintegrated. We can observe how many of those with more extreme nervous system diseases can take in and grasp only single things. They have lost the understanding of the essence of individual perceptions and their own connectedness to themselves and to others. The inability to concentrate and the loss of memory capacity go together. Whatever one is no longer able to fully survey and absorb, one can no longer concentrate upon and thus easily forgets. If the forgetting process attacks the motor system of the limbs, then the main symptom is paralysis in that area. Here there is an essential connection to the mental “paralysis” of severe overstimulation that can be observed as a precursor to a nervous system disease.

Of course, that does not mean that every nervous episode must lead to a disease of the nervous system. Besides overtaxing the nerves, infections can also bring about nerve diseases. But when one thinks that an infection is present at the beginning of the disease process, then one should always consider that there is a weakness of the nervous system already present which allows the infection in the first place. Such a weakness is more likely to occur when the nervous system in the organism has already become one-sided. Taking these connections into consideration, one can hope that determined treatment of weak nerves and nervousness through self-education could prevent the onset of diseases of the nervous system.

Overstimulation and constitution

The predominance of the nervous system also affects the constitution of the entire organism. “Asthenia,” a medical term that means weakness, is used to describe one type of body constitution that is characterized by weakness. The formation of the body is determined by the nervous system in this type of constitution. Body formation, which is served by the metabolism and blood, steps back in favor of the destructive forces that are stimulated by the nervous system in the entire organism. The result is a slender build and weaker body formation, which also affects the organs and weakens their function. People of this constitutional type tend to look at the details and are not able to perceive the whole picture. When asthenia is prevalent, such persons are more easily agitated and fatigued than others. Constitutional nervousness has to do in part with a genetic predisposition for it and in part with the environment in early childhood and youth.

There has been a marked increase in the number of people observed to be of this particular constitution. At the same time overstimulation is also

on the increase. The connection is obvious and irrefutable. However, the increase in overstimulation is much greater than the increase in constitutions characterized by asthenia. People with a rounder build, whose body formation is determined by the metabolic system rather than the nervous system, are suffering from overstimulation and nervous fatigue more today than in earlier times. That means that the tendency for the nervous system to become dominant is breaking through to other constitutional types. Rudolf Steiner spoke of a *neurasthenic disease process* in which the illness is completely determined by the nervous system. The preponderance of the nervous system does not need to express itself in the body form of the organism because it finds expression in the life and illness of the organism. This disease process is on the increase. But the final reason for the “constant rise of neurasthenic problems” is, here again, as a leading neurologist, G. Schaltenbrand, expressed it, the “spiritual uprooting of human beings.”

Wherever the disintegration that is normally present to a certain degree in the nervous system begins to spread to other parts of the organism, a neurasthenic disease can be determined. In heart and circulatory disease, statistically the number one cause of death today, the inflammatory disease forms are found less frequently than calcification and degeneration. But even chronic inflammations such as inflammation of the liver can be accompanied from the beginning by degenerative processes.

Onset and prevention in childhood

For the most part the nervous system in a small child still serves the formation of the body. This can be seen when one observes the deformations that can occur when a part of the nervous system fails due to illness. At a later age, the nervous system, especially the brain, serves the configuration of mental growth. Growth forces transform into thinking forces. Just as early in life cells combined and formed bodily organs, so now thoughts come together and build soul-mental organs which the child uses to learn to perceive and process the world in a soul-mental way. The beginning of the change of teeth is a sign that the creative growth activity in the body is complete. From then on no new organs are formed. The body and its organs continue to grow and mature but the forces that affect the formation of new organs are now active in the soul-spirit, mental arena. Then the child is ready for school.

From the viewpoint of the physical body, life forces die in the brain in order to serve a new life of mental-soul thought. In other regions of the body the life forces remain more available to the physical body such as in breathing, blood circulation, and metabolism. Contrary to the nervous system, in these other areas of the body physical development is still taking place. But the child needs these remaining life forces that are more closely bound to the physical body for its mental life. On the one hand, the nervous system is supplied with air and blood by the stimulation from the soul, as has already been mentioned. On the other hand, blood, respiration, and metabolism themselves again send quickening forces into the soul and make it possible

that we develop a warm interest in the world from the warmth of our blood and that we have feeling and willing forces available for thinking. They are dependent upon and serve each other.

All of this does not come to completion by itself. The child's environment plays the biggest role in how the child develops. For instance, if a child gets too little love and security, too little "motherly love," then his or her physical and mental development of warmth suffers which, again, causes a weakness in physical and mental development. Also, if there is too little stimulation in the school to awaken a "warm interest," then there can be disturbances in the physical foundation of a child's feeling and willing life as well as the physical life itself. If, in addition, a child is under pressure to perform and must fill his or her mind with as much as possible in as short a time as possible, then the processing of that which was supposed to be learned suffers. The feeling and willing life get too little nourishment and can not properly participate. In order to increase the intellectual capacity to which this kind of education one-sidedly appeals, it is necessary that more life forces be taken from the physical body than is advisable for its development. In this case, school makes the child ill. Evidence of the above is observable everywhere today.

The manifestation is that physical development escalates in the overburdened head region without being able to mature and develop in all directions. The increase in the number of people with asthenic constitutions has to do in part with today's educational practices. But there is also a connection to be made with the increasing overstimulation of school-age children, with the mental/soul after-effects. Wherever thinking is so one-sidedly addressed that the 'I' does not "get on board" with its feeling and willing life, then overstimulation and anxiety result; at least the predisposition to adult nervousness is found there.

Already back in 1912 Rudolf Steiner brought attention to the fact that all the "cramming" done for exams in school was aiding and abetting overstimulation.¹ While considering his present time and looking forward toward the future, he formulated that "education" must equal "healing." The Waldorf education he created is based on the recognition and acceptance of this statement. Waldorf education strives to address the whole being of the child, body and soul, and not just the head and its intellect. Above all, our nervous system, which is overburdened by today's transportation methods and technology, must be continually healed from the disease of disintegration to which it is predisposed and epidemic. This healing education would also simultaneously prevent adult overstimulation and the physical maladies that it precedes. Since the wheel of human development can not be turned back to the "good old days," it is more important than ever that countermeasures be taken in childhood to balance the negative effects of overstimulation.

How can I treat my overstimulation?

One must first ask: "How can I not treat it?" An overstimulated person might seek to relieve his or her suffering, which often disturbs sleep in a

most disastrous fashion, by reaching for tranquilizers and sleeping pills. This is not a treatment that affects the root cause of the problem. Even if no obvious addiction develops, as happens often enough, such remedies used continually will eventually result in the strengthening of what caused the nervousness in the first place. The person's activity will become more debilitated, and the ability of the mind and soul to keep in step more hindered. Tranquilization leads to a deadening that can, again, invite a much stronger state of agitation.

Other medications, the stimulants, do not bring about healing either. The temporary stimulation that the pill provides usually results in increased agitation over time. Yes, the thinking process is speeded up but it is also weakened in its intensity and clarity. Many studies have concluded that intelligence is not aided by these methods. When the effects of such medications have abated, then fatigue and mental dullness threaten to become that much stronger.

Overstimulated people should "enjoy" movies, radio, and television in very sparing doses. In cases of severe overstimulation, it is better to completely avoid them because they utterly encourage passivity in viewing and listening. For nervous people they can easily become intoxicants. The only forces one can depend upon to effectively treat overstimulation are those of the ego and soul, willing and feeling. Fundamentally, this treatment is truly a "self-treatment" like no other. Only in more severe cases must self-treatment be supported by appropriate medications and other applicable practices. Nervous people, who are carried away by a whirlwind of sense impressions and thoughts, must be able to get their feet on the ground again. They must relearn how to process what each day brings. The goal is: activate and "en-soul" the life of senses and thought by intensifying one's own willing and feeling forces.

Regulating the daily routine

In the morning, before someone steps into the day, he or she should gather his/her forces. One proven way is to mentally concentrate on something such as an important thought, a verse, a quote, or a prayer. Such an ingathering can radiate energy throughout the day.

Essentially, the day must be designed and shaped. It begins with the overstimulated person deciding what the challenges of the day will be. A morning preview, either in thought or by writing it down, helps a person to no longer feel manipulated and stressed by every challenge but rather to connect it with his or her willing 'I.' However, one must be careful to not take on too much. There is nothing that weakens the will more than not doing what one promised one's self to do.

While going about one's daily work a person should concentrate completely on the task at hand and forbid any thoughts about the next task, which many nervous people are not able to do.

Before bedtime the preview of the morning should be complemented by a review of the day. Now, the strong-willed taking-hold of the future becomes

a relaxed viewing of what is past. But even in this one must strive to be active. According to Steiner, the review should consist of going back over the events of the day in reverse order. One should begin with the evening and allow the memory pictures of the day to lead one back to the morning hours when one awoke. One soon realizes that in this way one can more or less protect oneself from an automatic flow of thought. As far as possible one should look at oneself in the remembered events. One should not tarry with single memories, become angry or happy again, and so forth, but rather view everything in a detached manner as if it had happened to someone else. Such an exercise can not only release the overstimulated person from memories of the past day which may disturb sleep but he or she also learns to gain distance from future impressions which could otherwise threaten to overwhelm. This is a very difficult exercise, and it is not recommended for extreme cases of nervousness.

At the end of the day one should sink anew into a spiritual or religious atmosphere that leads the mind out of the daily routine, out of the earthly world to connect to the spiritual-divine world. Before falling asleep, if one's mind and thoughts are gathered and open to being immersed into the spiritual-divine world, then it is able to absorb more energy for the following day than when one falls into a dulled sleep, torn and confused by all the thoughts of the day.

The effect of these described morning preview and evening review times can be deepened and improved through regular meditation exercises. However, during the day it is also necessary to create islands in the stream of daily experience, short periods of time in which one can relax and gather one's thoughts. In cases of more pronounced nervousness, rest periods should be introduced as a part of mealtimes. Some exhausted people benefit from a short nap after lunch. Others benefit more from a walk or finding a relaxing place to sit and do some light reading. During meals one should avoid all thoughts and conversations that might disturb the digestion. Highly spiritual topics should be avoided just as much as letting the events of the day roll by in one's mind. Nervous people, especially, should enjoy their meals. The food should taste good and all the different qualities of sweet, sour, salty, spicy, and so forth, should be markedly different. One should take care to eat food that can impart nature's energy in as unadulterated form as possible. Biodynamically-grown products are especially suited to this purpose. A nervous person must be aware that the healthy formation of the nervous system, more than that of the rest of the organism, is dependent upon a wholesome diet.

Over and above that, overstimulated people need still other breaks during the day which would allow them to perform the following special exercises:

The life of the senses is strengthened, for example, by practicing exact observation of nature in the loving style of Goethe. Feeling and willing stream into sense perceptions when one observes and absorbs the cloud formations

or the shape and color of the trees and their leaves during a walk. What has been perceived in this manner should then be compared to the respective shapes and colors the next day, the next week, or even the next month. In this way a daily walk (perhaps even a quarter of an hour is enough) supports acquiring spiritual content that is just as important as its healthful benefit to the physical body.

Thought life takes on new energy when the newly-gained pictorial aspect of the feeling life is also allowed to flow into the thought life. The exercise of reviewing the day is a way of practicing pictorial thought in which feeling and willing in thought become active. Always, when one concentrates on a thought that has been recalled from memory, fills it out and allows it to become vivid, one is working in this way. It becomes especially lively when one imagines, in one's own soul space, the creation of a flower from sprouting to blooming. In this way purely passive perception (such as television viewing) is replaced with active image experience. One's ability to retain is thereby also improved. This ability can be especially improved by something like this: when putting away an object such as a book, for instance, ask yourself, "What angle does the book form with the top of the shelf?" One absorbs the image of the relationship of the object to its surroundings. Likewise, every evening some object is "put away" like this, absorbing the image and then retrieving it in the morning upon awakening.

The ability to concentrate can be especially schooled through the following exercise: Pick up an object with your hand, call to mind all of its characteristics exactly, and in the next few minutes think only such thoughts that have to do with the object. For example, take a pencil and think about how its shape, size, and material are connected to its use. How is it made? Where does the material come from? Would a different shape work as well? The thought process should proceed in an absolutely logical manner. The thoughts themselves should be as exact and lively as possible and not crisscrossed with thoughts that do not belong. After a few days begin with a new object.

The life of feeling and willing can already be addressed by some of the above described exercises. The life of will itself can be exercised by performing every day at a certain time some small thing that does not already belong in the daily routine. For example, carry an object from one place to another, or tap three times with the left foot on the floor. Such exercises can be changed daily or weekly. Over a long period of time such seemingly insignificant exercises will make a person newly aware of his decisiveness and more confident in his actions. A strengthening of the will is also the result when one foregoes the fulfillment of a desire or when one weighs the pros and cons of an action before carrying it out.

In this way one gradually gains control over the illustrated overreaction of soul energy that is vented by agitation and anger. And, it is just this that strengthens the will at the same time. The overreaction that comes from

agitation and anger is not a sign of a strong will but just the opposite. Usually it is merely a smokescreen for the insecurity and indecisiveness of the overstimulated person. These kinds of exercises work like a dam in a river that harnesses the flow of water to make it available to an electrical power plant. By offering a foothold to our soul life we gain energy for the ego ('I') to serve the will.

In the physical, agitation and insecurity lead to stilted or cramped movement. In such cases curative eurythmy can have relaxing and revitalizing effects. If the fidgetiness affects a nervous person's writing, which is often the case, then it is helpful for that person to practice, over and over, writing single words and sentences very slowly, drawing each letter very carefully.

Artistic activities of all types (painting, sculpting, handcrafts, music, speech, and eurythmy) can call on an already awakened talent or one that is still sleeping and affect every aspect of the soul. Such exercises cause feeling and willing energy to flow into perceptions and thoughts in an especially intimate way while at the same time sublimating passionate and libidinal energies. This can lead to the beginning of sensible and curative use of free time which forms the valuable foundation from which we can explore the meaning of life.

Curing nervousness

The illustrated exercises for mental hygiene must be rhythmically repeated over a long period of time (although not all at the same time). From the viewpoint of the will, every person, even the most stressed person, is capable of doing these exercises. The more energy we put into regularly performing these exercises, the greater are their effects. After every illness that is cured, there is new, revitalized health. If a soul flaw has been successfully corrected, then there is room for a new ability. What ability is gained by curing nervousness? When we activate our sense, thought, and feeling life we learn to penetrate from the superficial aspects of an object into its essential aspects, into the essence of the world and our own lives. Overstimulated people who have been tossed to and fro from moment to moment, infuriated and agitated will become people whose spirit is present in every moment so that they can think and live out of their spirit. Prudence of soul and spiritual presence are the virtues we aspire to through the healing of nervousness.

Endnote:

1. Rudolf Steiner. *Nervosität und Ichheit*, Dornach: 1994, Rudolf Steiner Verlag, (*Nervousness and the Ego*).