HEALTH

Late-Stage Pandemic Is Messing With Your Brain

We have been doing this so long, we're forgetting how to be normal.

ELLEN CUSHING MARCH 8, 2021

PETER MARLOW / MAGNUM

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A Quite Possibly Wonderful Summer

JAMES HAMBLIN

I first became aware that I was losing my mind in late December. It was a Friday night, the start of my 40-somethingth pandemic weekend: Hours and hours with no work to distract me, and outside temperatures prohibitive of anything other than staying in. I couldn't for the life of me figure out how to fill the time. "What did I used to … do on weekends?" I asked my boyfriend, like a soap-opera amnesiac. He couldn't really remember either.

Since then, I can't stop noticing all the things I'm forgetting. Sometimes I grasp at a word or a name. Sometimes I walk into the kitchen and find myself bewildered as to why I am there. (At one point during the writing of this article, I absentmindedly cleaned my glasses with nail-polish remover.) Other times, the forgetting feels like someone is taking a chisel to the bedrock of my brain, prying everything loose. I've started keeping a list of questions, remnants of a past life that I now need a beat or two to remember, if I can remember at all: *What time do parties end? How tall is my boss? What does a bar smell like? Are babies heavy? Does my dentist have a mustache? On what street was the good sandwich place near work, the one that toasted its bread? How much does a movie popcorn cost? What do people talk about when they don't have a global disaster to talk about all the time? You have to wear high heels the* whole *night?* It's more baffling than distressing, most of the time.

Everywhere I turn, the fog of forgetting has crept in. A friend of mine recently confessed that the morning routine he'd comfortably maintained for a decade—wake up before 7, shower, dress, get on the subway—now feels unimaginable on a literal level: He cannot put himself back there. Another has forgotten how to tie a tie. A co-worker isn't sure her toddler remembers what it's like to go shopping in a store. The comedian Kylie Brakeman made a joke video of herself attempting to recall pre-pandemic life, the mania flashing across her face: "You know what I miss, is, like, those night restaurants that served alcohol. What were those called?" she asks. "And there were those, like, big men outside who would check your credit card to make sure you were 41?"

[Read: Sedentary pandemic life is bad for our happiness]

Jen George, a community-college teacher from Cape Elizabeth, Maine, told me she is losing her train of thought in the middle of a sentence more and more often. Meanwhile, her third grader, who is attending in-person school, keeps leaving his books, papers, and lunch at home. Inny Ekeolu, a 19-year-old student from Ireland, says she has found herself forgetting how to do things she used to do on a regular basis: swiping her bus pass, paying for groceries. Recently she came across a photo of a close friend she hadn't seen since lockdown and found that she couldn't recognize her. "It wasn't like I had forgotten her existence," she told me. "But if I had bypassed her on the street, I wouldn't have said hi." Rachel Kowert, a research psychologist in Ottawa, used to have a standing Friday-night dinner with her neighbors—and went completely blank when one of them recently mentioned it. "It was really shocking," Kowert told me. "This was something I really loved, and had done for a long time, and I had totally forgotten."

This is the fog of late pandemic, and it is brutal. In the spring, we joked about the Before Times, but they were still within reach, easily accessible in our shorter-term memories. In the summer and fall, with restrictions loosening and temperatures rising, we were able to replicate some of what life used to be like, at least in an adulterated form: outdoor drinks, a day at the beach. But now, in the cold, dark, featureless middle of our pandemic winter, we can neither remember what life was like before nor imagine what it'll be like after.

To some degree, this is a natural adaptation. The sunniest optimist would point out that all this forgetting is evidence of the resilience of our species. Humans forget a great deal of what happens to us, and we tend to do it pretty quickly—after the first 24 hours or so. "Our brains are very good at learning different things and forgetting the things that are not a priority," Tina Franklin, a neuroscientist at Georgia Tech, told me. As the pandemic has taught us new habits and made old ones obsolete, our brains have essentially put actions like taking the bus and going to restaurants in deep storage, and placed social distancing and coughing into our elbows near the front of the closet. When our habits change back, presumably so will our recall.

That's the good news. The pandemic is still too young to have yielded rigorous, peer-reviewed studies about its effects on cognitive function. But the brain scientists I spoke with told me they can extrapolate based on earlier work about trauma, boredom, stress, and inactivity, all of which do a host of very bad things to a mammal's brain.

"We're all walking around with some mild cognitive impairment," said Mike Yassa, a neuroscientist at UC Irvine. "Based on everything we know about the brain, two of the things that are really good for it are physical activity and novelty. A thing that's very bad for it is chronic and perpetual stress." Living through a pandemic—even for those who are doing so in relative comfort—"is exposing people to microdoses of unpredictable stress all the time," said Franklin, whose research has shown that stress changes the brain regions that control executive function, learning, and memory.

That stress doesn't necessarily feel like a panic attack or a bender or a sleepless night, though of course it can. Sometimes it feels like nothing at all. "It's like a heaviness, like you're waking up to more of the same, and it's never going to change," George told me, when I asked what her pandemic anxiety felt like. "Like wading through something thicker than water. Maybe a tar pit." She misses the sound of voices.

A boy drawing a face on a misted window with his finger

Peter Marlow

Prolonged boredom is, somewhat paradoxically, hugely stressful. Franklin said. Our brains hate it. "What's very clear in the literature is that environmental enrichment—being outside of your home, bumping into people, commuting, all of these changes that we are collectively being deprived of—is very associated with synaptic plasticity," the brain's inherent ability to generate new connections and learn new things, she said. In the 1960s, the neuroscientist Marian Diamond conducted a series of experiments on rats in an attempt to understand how environment affects cognitive function. Time after time, the rats raised in "enriched" cages—ones with toys and playmates—performed better at mazes.

Ultimately, said Natasha Rajah, a psychology professor at McGill University, in Montreal, our winter of forgetting may be attributable to any number of overlapping factors. "There's just so much going on: It could be the stress, it could be the grief, it could be the boredom, it could be depression," she said. "It sounds pretty grim, doesn't it?"

The share of Americans reporting symptoms of anxiety disorder, depressive disorder, or both roughly quadrupled from June 2019 to December 2020, according to a Census Bureau study released late last year. What's more, we simply don't know the long-term effects of collective, sustained grief. Longitudinal studies of survivors of Chernobyl, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina show elevated rates of mental-health problems, in some cases lasting for more than a decade.

I have a job that allows me to work from home, an immune system and a set of neurotransmitters that tend to function pretty well, a support network, a savings account, decent Wi-Fi, plenty of hand sanitizer. I have experienced the pandemic from a position of obscene privilege, and on any given day I'd rank my mental health somewhere north of "fine." And yet I feel like I have spent the past year being pushed through a pasta extruder. I wake up groggy and spend every day moving from the couch to the dining-room table to the bed and back. At some point night falls, and at some point after that I close work-related browser windows and open leisure-related ones. I miss my little rat friends, but I am usually too tired to call them.

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Sometimes I imagine myself as a Sim, a diamond-shaped cursor hovering above my head as I go about my day. Tasks appear, and I do them. Mealtimes come, and I eat. Needs arise, and I meet them. I have a finite suite of moods, a limited number of possible activities, a set of strings being pulled from far offscreen. Everything is two-dimensional, fake, uncanny. My world is as big as my apartment, which is not very big at all.

"We're trapped in our dollhouses," said Kowert, the psychologist from Ottawa, who studies video games. "It's just about surviving, not thriving. No one is working at their highest capacity." She has played The Sims on and off for years, but she always gives up after a while—it's too repetitive.

Earlier versions of The Sims had an autonomous memory function, according to Marina DelGreco, a staff writer for Game Rant. But in The Sims 3, the system was buggy; it bloated file sizes and caused players' saved progress to delete. So The Sims 4, released in 2014, does not automatically create memories. PC users can manually enter them, and Sims can temporarily feel feelings: happy, tense, flirty. But for the most part, a Sim is a hollow vessel, more like a machine than a living thing.

The game itself doesn't have a term for this, but the internet does: "smooth brain," or sometimes "head empty," which I first started noticing sometime last summer. Today, the TikTok user @smoothbrain1tch has nearly 100,000 followers, and stoners on Twitter are marveling at the fact that their "silky smooth brain" was once capable of calculus.

This is, to be clear, meant to be an aspirational state. It's the step after galaxy brain, because the only thing better than being a genius in a pandemic is being intellectually unencumbered by mass grief. People are celebrating "smooth brain Saturday" and chasing the ideal summer vibe: "smooth skin ,smooth brain." One frequently reposted meme shows a photograph of a glossy, raw chicken breast, with the caption "Cant think=no sad ♡." This is juxtaposed against a biology-textbook picture of a healthy brain, which is wrinkled, oddly translucent, and the color of canned tuna. The choice seems obvious.

Some Saturday not too long from now, I will go to a party or a bar or even a wedding. Maybe I'll hold a baby, and maybe it will be heavy. Inevitably, I will kick my shoes off at some point. I won't have to wonder about what I do on weekends, because I'll be doing it. I'll kiss my friends and try their drinks and marvel at how everyone is still the same, but a little different, after the year we all had. My brain won't be smooth anymore, but being wrinkly won't feel so bad. My synapses will be made plastic by the complicated, strange, utterly novel experience of being alive again, human again. I can't wait.