

# OVERVIEW

---

---

In *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives*, sociologist Todd Gitlin explores the modern-day problem of sensory overload in substantial depth. One of his primary goals in writing this book was to motivate readers to take the various images, messages, and sounds that they are bombarded with on a daily basis more seriously and to begin contemplating the potentially quite serious impact of their torrent on individuals as well as society.

Nobody knows for sure what the long-term, cumulative impact of the various stimuli that bombard, and potentially overwhelm, the human senses will be. Nevertheless, as Gitlin demonstrates, individuals are exposed to a larger number of images, messages, and sounds today than in the past, and many have become quite content to consume “whatever’s on” at the moment. As they do so, they experience an endless stream of sensory images that go flashing by, using electronic devices that have become increasingly convenient and portable. The end result, according to Gitlin, is a fast society and culture filled with people who feel the need to keep up, without “drowning,” as various forms of sensory stimuli continue to intrude more and more into so many aspects of their lives.

Sensory overload is the phenomenon of overwhelming the senses. When this occurs, individuals experience feelings of frustration or upset because they are unable to keep up with the excessive quantity of information and stimuli that bombard them on a daily basis. Sensory overload comes in a variety of forms. It can result from exposure to images and information emanating from too many electronic gadgets at once, or from viewing an action-packed movie on a huge, semicircular IMAX theater screen. It can be produced by watching theater productions that utilize huge projection screens, disconcerting lighting effects, illogical settings and situations, continuous movement, and related attributes all at the same time. It can be experienced by soldiers fighting in wars occurring overseas, such as when they are victims of ambush and attack, as well as by travelers to India, who are frequently overwhelmed by the seemingly chaotic conditions and population density they encounter.

Information overload is one of the most common forms of sensory overload that individuals experience today. In both their personal and professional lives, individuals have access to, and are bombarded by, more information nowadays than at any point in history, and that quantity is expected to intensify significantly in the decades to come. This information is delivered through an ever-increasing range of portable electronic devices which hold the potential to improve human communication, as well as pose the risk of continual information overload. Although a large number of students in recent years have been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, some experts believe that rather than possessing some inherent inability to concentrate, these young people have simply devised unique information-processing strategies in order to survive in our information-packed world. In recent studies of employed adults, a majority of such individuals have expressed that they experience information overload in the workplace, with a significant percentage indicating the concern that they are on the verge of reaching a “breaking point.” This is because they can readily become overwhelmed by the continuous barrage of e-mail messages, voicemail messages, text messages, mailings, and other forms of brain-clogging information that they are expected to process every day.

The modern-day phenomenon of multitasking can also produce sensory overload. This is because the human brain is unable to devote adequate attention to numerous different tasks at the same time. Recent developments in third-generation (3G) technology further encourage this phenomenon, as they enable advanced cell phones to surf the Web at high speeds, provide ready access to various forms of information, music, video, and related types of media content virtually anywhere, and can serve as advanced, portable multitasking machines. Although it is quite dangerous, it is not uncommon to find multitasking drivers speeding down the roadways. Researchers have found that the use of today's advanced gadgetry for multitasking purposes can enable individuals to cram the same number of tasks in a 24-hour period today that took people 31 hours to complete just a decade ago.

Sensory overload in its various forms is problematic for several reasons. It can make people feel disconcerted, dizzy, exhausted, and overwhelmed. It regularly causes individuals to experience anxiety and stress which can lead to larger health issues over time, and it endangers an individual's balance and peace of mind. It makes it difficult for people to concentrate and remain focused. Information overload causes people to feel like they actually need to keep trying to process all of the messages that bombard them around-the-clock each day for fear that they will miss out on something substantially important if they do not, which often leads them to steal information-processing time from sleep. In addition, it has led many people to experience the world around them as a never-ending series of "short bursts," rather than encouraging them to process a more limited range of information in greater depth, which affects both literacy and comprehension. It has also led many people to feel negatively about the state of the world in which we live, fostering a climate of fear as they typically encounter endless streams of negative information from around the globe. Although multitasking may sound like an effective time-saving measure, it actually requires people to spend more time to complete two or more tasks at the same time, and the results typically are less accurate than if they devoted attention to just one task at a time. It may also be especially problematic for children and teenagers because their brains are still in the process of developing.

What can be done to reduce sensory overload? Individuals can make to-do lists in order to prioritize the things they actually need to do on a daily basis, as well as to identify tasks and information sources that can be avoided. They must remember to make adequate downtime for themselves, such as to read a work of escapist literature, take a nature hike, walk along the beach, or get a massage. They can partake in meditation, peaceful visualization, or yoga in order to become more centered and achieve a more restful state. They can intentionally reduce their use of, and perceived reliance upon, computers and other gadgets of a high-tech culture, and they can intentionally restrict the amount of time they spend exposing themselves to media content each day. They can provide children with old-fashioned, less technological toys and games that do not overwhelm the senses. They can embrace the principles of the Slow Movement, which encourages individuals to slow down in all aspects of their lives, as much as feasible, to eliminate the "hurry sickness" that is so common today.

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

---

---

1. Have you personally ever experienced any form of sensory overload? If so, what did you experience, and how did it make you feel?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the belief that sensory overload is more common today than in the past? Why do you feel the way that you do?
3. Approximately how many different images, messages, and sounds do you feel you encounter on a daily basis? Explain the process that you followed to generate this number.
4. Make a list of the various forms of sensory overload that you feel exist in today's world.
5. Information overload is an increasingly common form of sensory overload. Have you ever experienced information overload? If so, what were the specific circumstances that led you to feel so overwhelmed?
6. What are five possible reasons why information overload is more common today than in past decades?
7. Although a large number of students in recent years have been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, some experts are starting to believe that rather than possessing some inherent inability to concentrate these young people have simply devised unique information-processing strategies in order to survive in today's information-packed world. How do you feel about this conclusion?
8. What sorts of things can individuals do to avoid information overload in their personal lives? In their professional lives?
9. Many people claim that multitasking reduces their stress levels and makes them more productive, even though scientific research suggests this may not necessarily be the case. What are your own views about the phenomenon of multitasking, and how have you formed those views?
10. To reduce the risk of experiencing sensory overload, individuals can partake in meditation or yoga in order to become more centered and achieve a more restful state. Have you personally ever tried meditation or yoga? If so, what were your reactions to the experience? If not, would you be interested in trying medication or yoga? Why or why not?
11. What do you believe are the five biggest dangers pertaining to sensory overload, and what might individuals do intentionally to minimize their personal risks of becoming victims of those dangers?

