



ARE YOU TEMPTED BY DOPAMINE FASTING?

It's the latest wellness trend said to clear your mind, heal burnout and curb our collective attention fatigue — but does dopamine fasting really work? The experts weigh in

Would it surprise you to learn that almost one in three people in Australia say they suffer from unsustainable workplace stress? Or that constant connection to the internet and access to all the information is contributing to ever-decreasing attention spans? In a hyper-connected, over-stimulated, always-on culture, it's little wonder that people are plagued with burnout. But what if — in just one day — you could reset your brain to expect less, respond more and be more easily satiated? This is the premise of dopamine fasting, the buzzy new biohacking trend to come out of Silicon Valley, a region known for embracing new wellness initiatives. Proponents of dopamine fasting say modern life activates too much dopamine, a neurotransmitter connected to the pleasure and reward centre of your brain, causing inattentiveness and burnout. The antidote to this, they say, is to abstain from the things that give you pleasure, or a 'dopamine hit' — such as technology, noise, sex, touch and even talking — for a period of 24 hours. The desired end result is

a neurochemical 'reset' — your brain decluttered, procrastination banished, focus sharpened.

THE THEORY BEHIND FASTING

Cameron Sepah, a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of California, is widely credited with coining the term 'dopamine fasting' after publishing a guide to the practice on LinkedIn, which went viral.

"Taking a break from behaviours that trigger strong amounts of dopamine release — especially in a repeated fashion — allows the brain to recover and restore itself," he says.

Prof Sepah cites one study in which students who used Facebook for around two hours a day then took a week-long break were found to exhibit healthier behaviours. "They ate out less, made fewer impulse purchases, were more efficient with time and reported feeling significantly less depressed," he says.

Performance coach Jari Roomer gave it a go and was so impressed with the results, he says he's now a convert and plans to do a dopamine fast every six months.

"I wanted to see what it would be like if I pressed the mental 'reset button' and be without external stimuli for a full day," he says. The rules for his fast included no electronics, reading, food, talking, music or coffee, but he was allowed water, meditation, walking, writing and 'deep thinking'.

"It felt like my brain was operating in a higher gear," he explains. "There were fewer sources that could condition my thinking, and my thoughts felt more in control, calmer and more authentic."

WHAT DOES DOPAMINE DO?

Dopamine has been described as 'the Kim Kardashian of molecules' because it's the one neurotransmitter people are most likely to have heard of. "It's got a bit of a flashy reputation, but it's just one of many neurotransmitters in the brain," explains Australian neuroscientist Dr Sarah McKay. "It's gained a reputation because it plays a part in the things people are curious about, like wanting, liking and pleasure — sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll you could say."

So while you may think of dopamine as the chemical that triggers gratification, it actually makes you seek pleasure rather than creating the pleasure itself.

"An example of how dopamine works may be if you enjoy an evening glass of wine," explains Dr McKay. "Often it's the wanting that drives you to drink it, not actually the pleasure you gain from drinking the wine itself."

WILL FASTING FIX YOU?

Not everyone is convinced that dopamine fasting delivers everything it promises.

"As humans, we love the idea of a quick fix, and dopamine fasting to me is one of those — promising a lot for very little effort," says psychologist Donna Cameron.

"The idea that you just have to do a dopamine fast to break any bad habits and clear your mind is just not realistic," she explains. "Come Monday, when you return to work and normal life, this simple fast will not have given you superpowers to not reach for that doughnut or to only check Facebook once that day."

Both Cameron and Dr McKay agree that stimulation is more complicated than just dopamine hits — it takes hard work to break bad habits and there's no evidence that a fast will provide anything other than some downtime.

"Dopamine is a lot more complex than simply being a molecule of pleasure," says Dr McKay. "It also has some perfunctory roles — it's involved in learning, memory, motivation and movement, too."

Because of this, she explains, a dopamine fast won't actually do much to the dopamine levels in your body.

"Can you in any way mindfully or behaviourally change the levels of dopamine in the pathways that are involved in starting to walk or standing up? That's impossible," she says. "You don't have a lot of conscious control over those parts of your brain. Dopamine just continues being used and produced in those pathways."

So, if abstaining from tech, touch and other stimuli for 24 hours doesn't affect dopamine levels or break habits, what does it do?

"I do believe that initially after this downtime a person will feel amazing,"

says Cameron. "But not because of the fast, but because they feel rested."

"There's probably a lot of benefit that comes from a lot of the things [people abstain from]," agrees Dr McKay. "Some of the things I think are extreme, though."

Like not talking to people, because that can actually be rewarding — I think we have enough social disconnection."

Just like the one-meal-a-day diet, microdosing or replacing all meals with

Soylent and other wellness trends to come out of Silicon Valley (see box), there's currently no scientific evidence to support the efficacy of dopamine fasting.

As Dr McKay puts it: "Perhaps people are learning to mindfully modify their behaviour, but it's got nothing to do with brains or the neurobiology of dopamine, they've just been seduced by the allure of the 'neuroscience' explanation."

"These tech bros in Silicon Valley have been raised to iconic status and if they're hacking something, we assume it must be worthwhile, but dopamine fasting is not. We don't have any evidence to support it. Just because something sounds like neuroscience, doesn't mean it is."

"My thoughts felt more in control, calmer and more authentic"

— Performance coach Jari Roomer on trying out dopamine fasting

WEIRD WELLNESS TRENDS FROM SILICON VALLEY

Dopamine fasting began in Silicon Valley. Here's some other dubious trends the tech experts have started...

One meal a day

Twitter chief executive Jack Dorsey says he eats only one meal a day and fasts all weekend. Dorsey has said this diet helps him save time, stay focused and sleep better, but experts say this kind of 'intermittent fasting' could be dangerous and promote disordered eating.



Soylent

It's Silicon Valley's favourite meal-replacement shake, despite it being described as tasting like 'licking stamps' or 'a protein shake with sawdust in it'. The company started up in 2013 and now sells its products across the US.



Microdosing

Taking crumb-sized amounts of psychedelic drugs like LSD and magic mushrooms to improve mood and cognitive function first gained popularity in Silicon Valley, where it has been described as a 'life hack du jour'. There's no research into this area, but results from the first-ever placebo-controlled trial of microdosing are due to come out this year.



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