

HOW TO BE CENTERED IN A CRAZY WORLD

Worn out by the news cycle? Overwhelmed with choices? Anxious about seeing everyone's perfect lives online? Train your brain to buffer you from the age of overload.

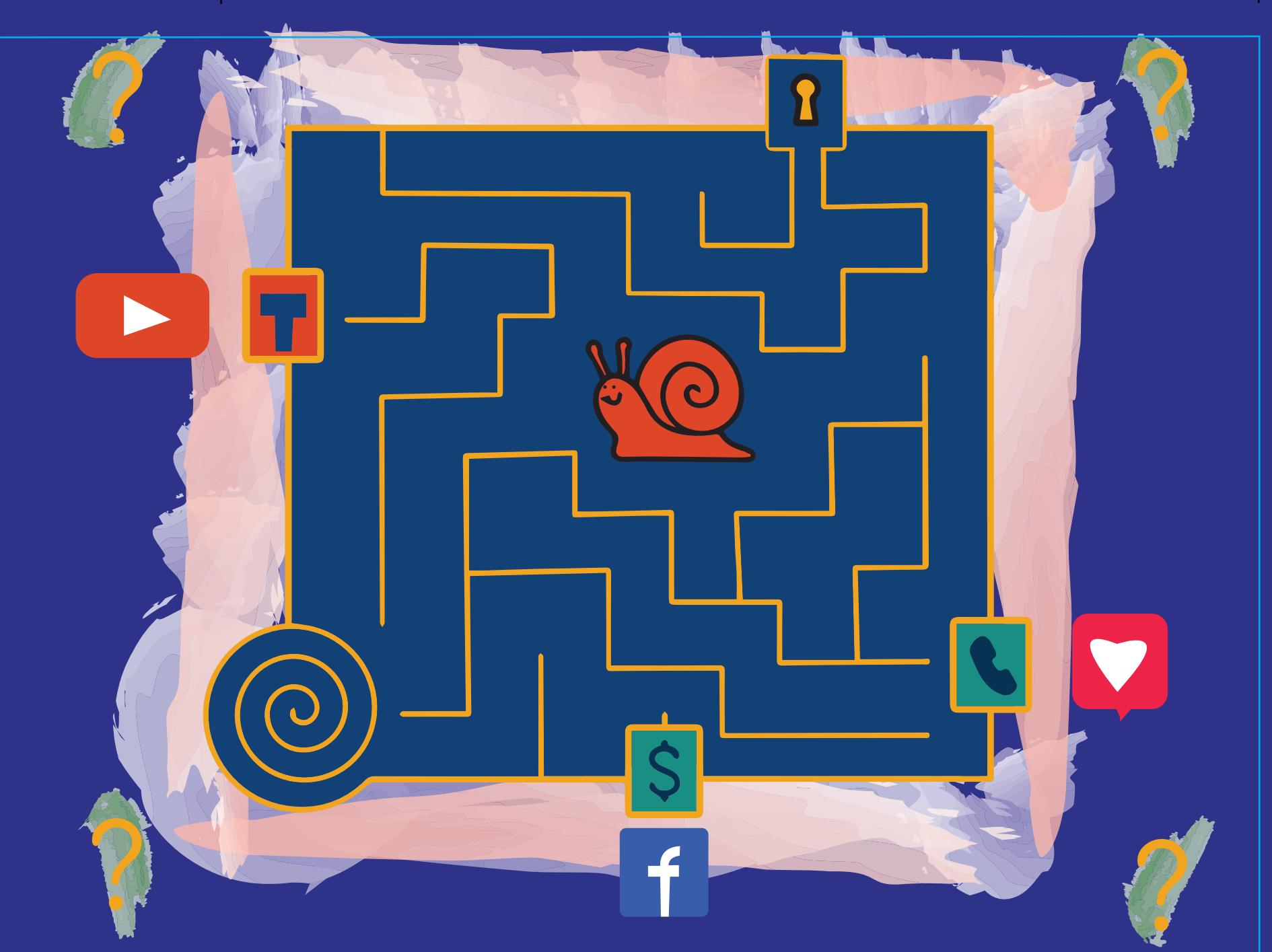
FOR THE PAST SIX MONTHS, MY FRIEND LAURA and I have had a standing Monday-night date: At 6:35pm, we drive five minutes up the road from my house in Northern California to Spirit Rock Meditation Center, where some of the country's best-known mindfulness teachers lead evening sessions. We remove our shoes, get settled on a meditation pillow and then close our eyes and breathe for 40 minutes. Afterward, the evening's speaker gives a stirring, thought-provoking talk on Buddhist Wisdom. Sounds lovely, right? It is. When we actually go. Of the 24 sessions since we began mindfulness Mondays, we've attended exactly three. A regular dose of calm would be good for me. But I'm usually too weary or overwhelmed to pry myself off the sofa. In a head-to-head contest between binge watching and breath-watching, *Westworld* wins. I'm busy, yes. But the cause of my malaise is deeper. I feel overwhelmed. Bombarde-

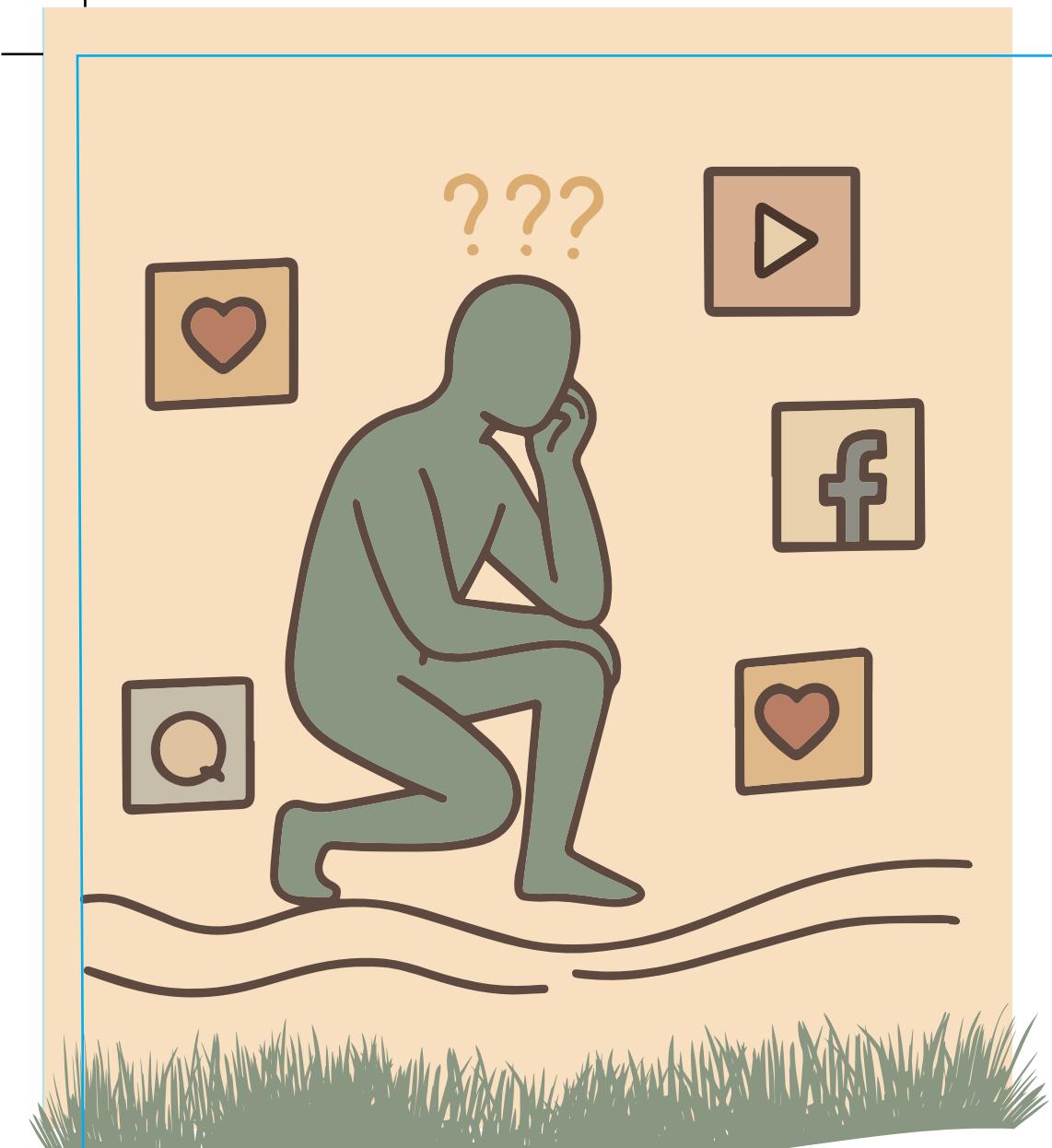
Assaulted by the pace and pressure of life. And I'm not the only one. Social-media mentions of 'angst' and similar words are up fourfold since 2015, according to Ipsos, a market-research company. And a Pew Research Center survey in February 2018 found

that almost 7 in 10 Americans feel worn out by the amount of news they receive. When I posted a query about the craziness of life, an avalanche of responses came in. Matthew, an executive at an advertising company, said "I often have a sense of feeling crushed by the 24/7 newsfeed." Milana, a writer, started getting headaches from the onslaught of bad news along with arguments and disagreements on her Facebook feed. Liz, the founder of a fashion startup, feels beaten down by "the stress of

entrepreneurship, seeing other entrepreneurs' highlight reels and the crush of newly engaged peers flashing their rings on social media." Ashley, a well-being coach, says the desire "to have everything in life be 'just right'" pushed her to a point of burnout. "Our world is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, and as a result, many people are living in a state of constant sympathetic-nervous-system overdrive," explains Rick Hanson, a psychologist and co-author of *Resilient*:

How to Grow an Unshakable Core of Calm, Strength and Happiness. "We can't change the world, at least not quickly. But we can change our brains. By practicing simple mindfulness skills, all of us have the capacity to develop a deeper sense of calm and compassion that can help us handle difficult moments with greater equanimity."





By rehearsing these techniques, over time you can build a reservoir of inner strength that allows you to weather the shocks, upsets, uncertainty and stress of modern culture, Hanson adds. Sounds good to me. Here's why we're all so frazzled, along with mindful ways to get by.

The onslaught of over stimulation

Crowds. Traffic. Choices. And that's just at the grocery store. "Our brains are optimized for being hunter-gatherers, a time when food options were minimal and you encountered maybe a thousand people during your entire life," says Daniel Levitin, a professor emeritus of neuroscience at McGill University in

Canada and the author of *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload*. Now our ancient brains are forced to cope with blaring car horns, nonstop communication, masses of humanity – and hundreds of daily decisions, from ordinary "recycle or trash?" to weighty "radiation or surgery". "Decisions are draining," says Levitin. "Each one uses up glucose, the fuel that allows your brain to function." On an average day, we also take in 100,000-plus words, according to research from the University of California, San Diego. That's the equivalent of reading half of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. "We're consuming more information than we can process, and it's setting off a fight-or-flight response that makes us feel overwhelmed," Levitin says. Add the minute-by-minute

update about topics of the day – most Americans check their phones with 15 minutes of waking up – and the 121 emails the average office worker fields everyday, and you have a recipe for cognitive overload. "A single unread email can be such a distraction it affects you as if you've temporarily lost 10 IQ points," says Levitin. But by approaching your day more mindfully, you can tame the chaos. First, seed in mini-breaks throughout the day that minimize stress by sheltering each of your senses. Close your eyes and breath; each exhale tips into the calming, parasympathetic branch of your nervous system. Pet your dog or cat – and action that releases oxytocin, the hormone of love and bonding. Seek out quiet. As little as two

minutes, research shows, reduces heart rate and blood pressure. It's even more relaxing than music.

To pare down your decision-making, arrange your life so that as many choices as possible are habitual, suggests Barry Schwartz, a psychologist and the author of *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*. "Decide you'll go to the gym every Monday, Wednesday and Friday after work and always have pizza on Friday and grocery shop on Sundays," he says. When it comes to technology, create boundaries. "By checking emails no more than three times a day, you minimize the effect it has," says Levitin. Impossible you say? Then skim your emails and prioritize the ones that require a quick response, delete what you can, and flag the rest to read later, when you're under less pressure. For your phone, delete distracting apps, turn off notifications, and put it on Do Not Disturb a couple of hours before you go to bed. You can adjust your settings so you can still get calls from key people – your kids, say – or from someone who tries to reach you more than two times in a row. Granted this is all easier said than done. Technology is addictive. Every ping zaps your brain with a hit of the pleasure chemical dopamine. If you have trouble letting go of 24/7 monitoring, try taking a 15 minute break every two hours. "The likelihood of missing something momentous in that amount of time is low. And it gives your brain a chance to reset," says Levitin, adding, "Here's a way to think about technology that helps me reign it in: When I'm constantly checking emails and texts, I'm allowing other people to decide how I spend my time. If you want to approach your life more mindfully, you need to decide when and how you interact with others."

The art of doing less

Try this revealing experiment: When you run into friends and ask them how they're doing, notice with how many times they respond with "Busy." Better yet, notice how often you respond that way yourself. (I've been known to pull out the phrase "Crazy busy," as if adjective-free busyness doesn't quite capture how frantic I feel.)

Evidence of our culture's addiction to busyness has shown up in our holiday cards, according to researchers at North Dakota State University who have been collecting and tracking the annual massives for nearly 20 years – and discovered a rise in the use of the words "hectic", "whirlwind", "frantic" and "busy". But here's the amusing thing. Studies show that we are no more busy than we were 30 years ago. "Busyness is a product of our own fear and anxiety", says Washam. "We're trying to find comfort in frenetic movement, but the real doorway to sanity is to learn how to unplug and find some stillness within." That makes sense to me – and is a helpful reminder: my doorway to sanity doesn't lie up the road in a meditation center, but is in every moment I choose to be present and drop in to the quiet recesses of my own mind.

