WHY YOU FEEL FLAT, EMPTY AND FORGETFUL

The 4 brain chemicals chronic stress depletes
— and how to restore them naturally.

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Have you ever looked at your life — which looks great on paper — and wondered why you feel nothing? Or why you can't switch off, but you also can't switch on?

This isn't a mindset problem. It's not weakness. And it's not something you can push through. What you're experiencing is chemistry — specifically, what happens when a nervous system has been running on high alert for too long.

When stress becomes chronic — anything over three months — it starts to break down your brain's neurotransmitters. These are the chemical messengers that regulate your mood, motivation, focus, calm and sense of joy. Without them, you're running on empty. And no amount of pushing harder will fill the tank.

> *There are two types of neurotransmitters. Excitatory ones rev the brain up — they give you drive, focus, motivation and that flow state where you can work for hours. Inhibitory ones calm the brain down — they're your brakes, preventing anxiety, overwhelm and looping thoughts. You need both in balance. Chronic stress depletes both.*

This guide walks you through the four key neurotransmitters affected by chronic stress, what it feels like when each one is depleted, and — most importantly — what you can do to restore them. Not through supplements or hacks, but through the habits your nervous system was actually designed for.

EXCITATORY

Dopamine

THE DRIVE NEUROTRANSMITTER

Dopamine is what makes you want to go after something. It's not really about pleasure — it's about anticipation, motivation and pursuit. It's what gives you that fire for your work, your drive to build something, your passion for what you do.

Chronic stress chews through dopamine because cortisol directly interferes with dopamine synthesis and receptor sensitivity. And here's the cruel irony: high achievers often cope with low dopamine by chasing more achievement — which spikes cortisol further and depletes dopamine even faster. It's a treadmill that looks like productivity.

When dopamine is depleted, you might notice:

- Loss of passion for work you used to love
- Starting things but not finishing them
- Nothing feels worth doing — and you can't explain why
- Endless scrolling, seeking stimulation but never feeling satisfied
- That flat, grey feeling even when life looks good on paper
- Tendency toward more addictive behaviours — alcohol, ultra-processed food, apps

How to restore dopamine

· Celebrate small wins explicitly — your brain needs you to name and acknowledge progress. Depleted dopamine flattens the reward response, so wins go unregistered unless you deliberately mark them.

· Set small, completable goals daily — the brain doesn't distinguish between a big win and a small one neurochemically. Completion is the trigger.

· Cross things off your list — physically. The act of completion releases dopamine.

· Add novelty — dopamine loves new. A different walking route, rearranging your workspace, trying something small and different.

· Reduce dopamine drains — social media apps, alcohol and ultra-processed foods all create artificial dopamine spikes followed by crashes, lowering your baseline over time.

· Cook at home and eat whole foods — what you eat directly affects your ability to produce dopamine.

INHIBITORY

Serotonin

THE STEADINESS NEUROTRANSMITTER

Serotonin isn't really about happiness — it's about emotional steadiness, belonging and feeling like you're enough. When it's depleted, the world starts to feel unsafe and uncertain. You become more reactive, more sensitive, and much harder on yourself.

Here's something that surprises a lot of people: 90% of your serotonin is produced in your gut, not your brain. Which means gut health is neurotransmitter health. When stress shows up in your stomach — bloating, discomfort, digestive issues — it's often showing up in your mood too, and for exactly the same reason.

When serotonin is depleted, you might notice:

- Low mood that's hard to explain or shake
- Heightened sensitivity — things that never used to trigger you, trigger you now
- Feeling disconnected, even from people you love
- Negative thought loops, especially at night
- Craving carbs and sugar
- Difficulty receiving compliments, acknowledging wins, or letting someone help you
- Snappiness or reactivity, followed by shame — which creates more stress

Worth noting: If you can't receive a compliment, can't acknowledge a win, or can't let someone help you — that's often low serotonin. Rebuilding it is partly relational. Connection isn't a luxury. It's neurochemistry.

How to restore serotonin

· Morning sunlight within the first hour of waking — outside, not through glass, without sunglasses. This sets your serotonin-melatonin rhythm for the entire day.

· Movement — especially rhythmic, steady movement like walking, swimming or cycling. The rhythm itself is part of the mechanism.

· Gut health — add fermented foods (yoghurt, kefir, kimchi, sauerkraut), increase fibre, and reduce alcohol and ultra-processed foods.

· Social connection — being with people you feel safe with genuinely increases serotonin production. Don't isolate when you're stressed.

• Gratitude — not a list of five things, but one thing you actually feel. Felt gratitude activates serotonin pathways.

INHIBITORY

GABA

THE BRAKES

GABA is your brain's primary inhibitory neurotransmitter. Its job is to slow down the firing of neurons — to let your nervous system come off high alert. Think of it as the brake pedal. Without it, your brain can't stop accelerating.

Cortisol directly reduces GABA activity. And here's something worth knowing: alcohol temporarily mimics GABA — which is why stressed, high-functioning women often reach for a glass of wine to switch off at the end of the day. It works in the short term. But it also disrupts serotonin production and makes the underlying depletion worse.

When GABA is depleted, you might notice:

- Racing thoughts, especially at night
- Inability to relax even when you finally have time to
- That wired-but-tired feeling
- Anxiety that has no clear cause
- Difficulty transitioning out of work mode
- A brain that simply won't stop

This is important: The inability to switch off is not a personality trait. It's a GABA problem. You can't just decide to relax — the neurochemical braking system is literally impaired. This is not a willpower issue.

How to restore GABA

· Slow, extended exhale breathing — breathe out for twice as long as you breathe in. This directly activates the parasympathetic nervous system and increases GABA activity. Even 5 minutes changes your neurochemistry.

· Box breathing and meditation — even imperfect, inconsistent practice supports GABA over time. The brain learns that stillness is safe.

· Yoga and slow, held movement — specifically shown in research to increase GABA levels. Not power yoga. Slow, deliberate, grounding movement.

· Magnesium — found in dark leafy greens, nuts, seeds and dark chocolate. Supports GABA receptors and is depleted by chronic stress.

· Evening wind-down rituals — warm bath or shower, dim lighting, no devices. These signal the nervous system to downregulate. This isn't self-care mythology. It's biology.

EXCITATORY

Norepinephrine

THE FOCUS NEUROTRANSMITTER

Norepinephrine drives attention, concentration and cognitive sharpness. In small amounts, it's what helps you focus under pressure — which is why high achievers often thrive in deadline mode. But chronic stress exhausts the supply. And when it crashes, so does your ability to think clearly.

The paradox is that pushing harder to focus when norepinephrine is depleted makes it worse. Recovery here is mostly about reducing the demand on your system — not adding more.

When norepinephrine is depleted, you might notice:

- Brain fog — thoughts feel slow or cloudy
- Difficulty prioritising or making decisions
- Procrastination (often mistaken for laziness)
- Feeling mentally dull despite being intelligent
- Looping, unproductive thinking — going over the same problem without resolution

How to restore norepinephrine

· Single-task — multitasking burns through norepinephrine. One thing at a time, completed, before moving to the next. Map your day on paper with times and tasks so your brain isn't holding everything at once.

· Protein at breakfast — norepinephrine is synthesised from tyrosine, an amino acid found in eggs, Greek yoghurt, meat and dairy. Don't skip breakfast or eat carbs only.

· Reduce caffeine dependence — caffeine borrows from norepinephrine reserves. It feels like focus but it's drawing down a depleted account. If you're going to have it, have it after breakfast, not instead of it.

· Get out in nature — your brain restores norepinephrine in low-stimulation, low-demand environments. Walking outside is not wasted time. It's restoration.

· Rest without guilt — the brain replenishes norepinephrine in genuinely low-demand states. Staring out a window, doing nothing. This is part of the work.

The Bigger Picture

Look at what appears across all four neurotransmitters and you'll see the same things keep showing up:

- Movement outdoors
  - Walking, swimming, cycling — especially in nature and in sunlight.
- Quality sleep
  - The brain resets and restores neurotransmitter precursors during sleep. Without it, everything else is a band-aid.
- Genuine social connection
  - Not networking. Not social media. Real, warm human connection.
- Reducing artificial stimulation
  - Devices, alcohol, ultra-processed food all disrupt the baseline.
- Completing small things and acknowledging them
  - This is neurological repair, not positive thinking.

> *These aren't coincidental. They're what humans evolved doing. Chronic stress, screen time, social isolation and relentless achievement culture systematically remove all of them. As we move back toward them, the body starts to rebalance itself — because that's what it was designed to do.*

You don't need to overhaul everything at once. Start with one thing from this guide this week. Morning sunlight. Protein at breakfast. A walk outside without your phone. Crossing one small thing off your list and actually acknowledging it.

Your nervous system knows how to heal. It just needs you to stop working against it.