

# THE SECOND SLOWING

When my brain slowed once —  
and why I'm wondering if  
it's happening again

SHAURAV SEN

# THE SECOND SLOWING

*When my brain slowed once — and why I'm wondering if it's happening again*

I don't usually write publicly about personal health experiences.

Not because they didn't matter, but because most of the time they're not relevant to the questions I'm trying to explore. This is one of the rare exceptions—and I want to be clear about why I'm sharing it.

In 2003, I was diagnosed with cancer—lymphoma. It was serious—almost stage four—and the treatment required seven months of intense chemotherapy. I'm not sharing this for sympathy, nor because that chapter of my life defines me today. I'm sharing it because something I experienced then—something I eventually stopped thinking about—has resurfaced recently in a completely different context. And the parallel has been difficult to ignore.

During treatment, I noticed that my thinking felt different. Slower, somehow. Not dramatically impaired, but dulled around the edges. Sustained, rigorous thinking—something that I had always prided myself on—felt exhausting in a way I couldn't quite explain. Complex ideas took more effort to hold in my head. Mental stamina seemed reduced.

At the time, the internet was still relatively new, but I used it to understand what I was feeling. That's when I came across a term that resonated immediately: *chemo brain*. It wasn't a diagnosis so much as a description—a way to name a cluster of cognitive side effects that many cancer patients reported. Slower processing. Reduced focus. Mental fatigue.

That label helped. It contextualized the experience without alarming me. And eventually, as treatment ended and life resumed, my thinking returned. I went back to full-time work. I re-engaged with complex, demanding problems. Over time, the sensation faded completely. I stopped thinking about chemo brain altogether.

Until recently.

What's important is that nothing medical triggered its return. No illness. No treatment. Just a subtle, familiar feeling that I hadn't experienced in years—and hadn't expected to feel again.

## **What I am Noticing Now**

Like many people today, I use AI regularly. I use it to summarize complex material. To examine problems from multiple perspectives. To break things down using first principles. To surface angles I might miss. It's fast, capable, and undeniably useful.

But I've started to notice something about how I'm using it.

When I encounter dense or complex ideas, my first instinct is no longer to wrestle with them myself. It's to ask for a summary. When faced with ambiguity, I ask for multiple interpretations—sometimes even opposing ones—rather than sitting with the tension long enough to form my own. Tasks that once felt like mental exercise now feel like something I can, and perhaps should, delegate.

It's efficient. It's rational. And yet, something about it feels uncomfortably familiar.

I find myself taking longer to truly understand complex material—not because it's harder, but because I'm engaging with it differently. I'm spending less time inside my own thinking, less time pushing through confusion, less time testing my own reasoning before seeing a polished alternative. And occasionally, I notice that same faint sensation I remember from years ago: the feeling that my brain is moving more slowly, or at least relying less on its own momentum.

The difference is striking when I pay attention to it. I used to read something challenging and feel my mind actively working—questioning assumptions, connecting ideas, pushing back against weak arguments. Now I'm more likely to skim for the main point, or worse, to reflexively reach for a tool that will do that work for me. The mental friction that used to signal engagement now feels like something to avoid or optimize away.

Here's what makes this worth examining: I'm not making a medical claim. Chemo brain and AI-assisted thinking aren't equivalent experiences—one was imposed by illness, the other is entirely voluntary. But the subjective sensation? That feeling of cognitive dulling, of reduced mental strain, of reaching for easier paths? They rhyme in a way I can't ignore.

And what makes this more than just a personal observation is that the second experience isn't happening to me—I'm choosing it. We're choosing it. Every day.

## **The Pattern I Keep Hearing**

Over the past year, I've heard variations of this from family members, friends, and colleagues. People describe feeling mentally "lazier," or less patient with complexity. They talk about struggling to read long-form material, or defaulting to summaries even when

they have the time and ability to go deeper. They say things like, "I can still think—I just don't feel like I need to anymore."

And yet, no one seems eager to stop.

AI makes this pattern feel reasonable. Why expend cognitive energy when a capable system offers to do the heavy lifting? Why push through mental friction when clarity is a prompt away? The value proposition is immediate. The tradeoff is invisible.

But here's the question I can't shake: What happens when we consistently choose efficiency over effort—especially when the effort itself is how thinking muscles stay strong?

## **What We Might Be Trading**

The first time my thinking slowed, I noticed it because it was new. Unwelcome. Imposed by circumstances beyond my control. And eventually, it returned because I had no choice but to re-engage with difficult, demanding work.

This time, the shift is quieter. More comfortable. And far easier to rationalize.

I don't know whether relying on AI in this way changes our brains, or simply changes our habits. I don't know whether what I'm feeling is temporary, adaptive, or something we'll all learn to balance more consciously over time. And I'm genuinely not interested in alarmism or nostalgia for some imagined pre-AI purity of thought.

But I do know this: Every capability we outsource becomes a capability we no longer maintain through use. That's not inherently bad—we've been outsourcing memory to written language for millennia, calculation to machines for decades. The question isn't whether we should use tools. It's whether we're conscious of what we're choosing not to exercise.

Because unlike physical muscles, cognitive ones don't announce their atrophy loudly. They just make complex thinking feel slightly harder, slightly less natural, slightly more avoidable—until one day you realize you've been taking the shortcut so long you're not sure you remember the direct route anymore.

What troubles me most isn't the tools themselves. It's how seamlessly they've integrated into my thinking process without my fully noticing. There was no moment when I decided to think less rigorously. No conscious choice to avoid intellectual challenge. Just a gradual drift toward convenience that felt, in each individual moment, perfectly justified.

## The Invitation

I'm sharing this not as a conclusion, but as a genuine curiosity I can't quite shake. I suspect many others are feeling something similar, even if they haven't put words to it yet.

If that's true, it feels worth noticing—not to resist progress, but to understand what it's changing in us. If you've felt this too, I'd be interested to hear how you're thinking about it. Not in terms of answers, but awareness. Not whether AI is "good" or "bad," but what you're noticing about how your own thinking has shifted. Sometimes the most important changes don't announce themselves loudly. They just alter how thinking feels, one small choice at a time.

Twenty-two years ago, I noticed my brain slowing and went looking for answers. I found a name for it, lived through it, and eventually moved past it.

This time, I'm noticing it again—and I'm not sure we've even started asking the right questions yet.

~Shaurav

---

*When was the last time you chose to struggle through something complex rather than ask AI to simplify it?*

*What kinds of thinking do you find yourself avoiding now that you didn't avoid a year ago?*

*If you noticed your physical stamina decreasing, you'd probably do something about it. Why doesn't the same instinct apply to mental stamina?*

---