THE TBI BURNER THEORY

Why your brain can feel busy before your day even begins

Imagine your attention and memory as a stove with six burners. After a brain injury, some may already be in use before you try to do anything new.

A simple idea

You may not need to try harder. You may need fewer things competing for your attention.

A gentle guide for people living with traumatic brain injury, families, friends, and support partners.

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THE TBI BURNER THEORY™

Why Brain Injury Feels Like Your Brain Is Already Busy Before the Day Even Starts

After a traumatic brain injury, your working memory has fewer "free burners." Pain, symptoms, and stress occupy valuable mental resources, leaving little capacity for new information. It's not a lack of effort—it's a lack of available space.

THE STOVE TOP METAPHOR

Think of your brain as a six-burner stove. Before your injury, most burners were available to handle whatever life threw at you.

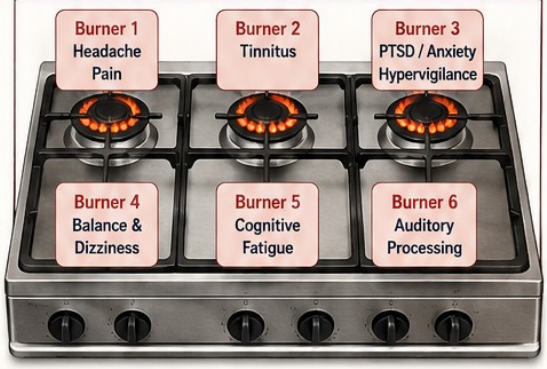
After TBI, several burners are already occupied before breakfast.

1. HEALTHY BRAIN – BURNERS AVAILABLE



Plenty of capacity for thinking, learning, planning, remembering, and problem solving.

2. LIVING WITH TBI – BURNERS ALREADY FULL



"Can you remember this for me?"

NO OPEN BURNERS LEFT

There is no capacity left to take in, process, and store new information. It's not that you didn't try—your stove is full.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

- You forget someone's name.
- You lose track of a conversation.
- You walk into a room and forget why.
- You miss an appointment.
- Your spouse thinks you weren't listening.

In reality, your working memory was overloaded. Nothing was available to "cook" the new information.

3. WHY EXTERNAL MEMORY HELPS

Writing things down isn't cheating. Calendars aren't crutches. Voice notes aren't laziness. They move a pot off the stove onto the countertop—freeing up a burner for new information.

- Write it down
- Use your calendar
- Use voice notes
- Make lists
- Set reminders



External tools create mental space.

MORE SPACE = MORE CAPACITY

4. THE GOAL

The goal isn't better memory.
The goal is more available burners.

- Reduce pain
- Improve sleep
- Treat hearing problems
- Manage anxiety
- Reduce sensory overload
- Capture information externally

Each step frees up a burner. More burners = easier thinking.

> **"Remember Less. Capture More."**

It's not about forcing your brain to hold more. It's about freeing up capacity for living.

UNDERSTANDING CREATES EMPATHY. TOOLS CREATE FREEDOM.

Be patient with yourself. Be patient with others.
The stove is real. The struggle is real. The progress is real.

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REMEMBER LESS. CAPTURE MORE.
EDUCATE. EMPOWER. HEAL TOGETHER.
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This model is for educational and supportive purposes only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice.

1 | What is a “burner”?

A burner stands for a little bit of your brain’s available attention and working memory. Working memory is what helps you hold information in mind long enough to use it.

You use it when you listen to directions, remember a name, follow a conversation, or decide what to do next.

Before brain injury

Imagine most of the burners are free. You have room to listen, think, remember, and solve problems.

After brain injury

Pain, fatigue, stress, dizziness, ringing in the ears, or trouble processing sounds may already be using some of those burners.

The point

A task can feel hard even when you are trying your best. Your attention may already be occupied.

This is a metaphor, not a medical test or a literal count of brain capacity. Your experience may change from day to day.

2 | Why small requests feel big

Picture this. You wake up with a headache. The room is noisy. You are tired, and you are already using energy to stay focused.

Someone says: “Can you remember this for me?”

You care about what they said. You want to remember it. But there may be too much happening in your head to hold one more piece of information.

What others may see

- You forget a name or an appointment.
- You lose your place in a conversation.
- You walk into a room and forget why.
- You seem distracted or slow to respond.

What may really be happening

Your working memory may be overloaded. Forgetting is not proof that you do not care.

A helpful phrase

“I want to remember this. Please give me a moment to write it down.”

3 | Make room for the next thing

The goal is not to force your brain to hold everything. The goal is to make room for what matters right now.

Put information outside your head

- Write one thing down as soon as you hear it.
- Use a phone reminder or calendar alert.
- Record a short voice note.
- Keep a small list in one easy-to-find place.

Reduce competing demands

- Turn down background noise when you can.
- Ask for one instruction at a time.
- Pause before starting another task.
- Take a break before your brain feels completely overloaded.

Remember less. Capture more.

Using tools is a strategy, not a weakness. A reminder can free up attention for living.

4 | Notice your own full burners

Different people have different “burners.” The things that use your attention may change by the hour.

Some common examples are pain, poor sleep, anxiety, tinnitus, sensitivity to light or noise, dizziness, and mental fatigue.

An easy daily check-in

Right now, what is taking up space in my head?

☐ Pain or headache

☐ Noise, light, or hearing effort

☐ Worry or stress

☐ Poor sleep or fatigue

☐ Something else: _____

What would help me free one burner?

_____

_____

Try one change

You do not have to solve every problem at once. Pick one pressure you can reduce or one task you can capture.

5 | When talking to family and friends

The stove picture can help explain something that is difficult to see. A person may look fine while working very hard just to keep up.

If you are living with TBI

You can say: “My brain is already handling a lot. I can listen better if we slow down and handle one thing at a time.”

If you are supporting someone

Try giving one request at a time. Allow extra response time. Write down important details. Ask what kind of reminder actually helps.

Avoid assuming that forgetfulness means a lack of interest, effort, or love.

Together

The goal is not to win an argument about what someone should remember. It is to find a way for the information to stick.

6 | One small plan for tomorrow

Choose just one thing to make easier. Keep the plan simple.

The thing I want to remember

_____

Where I will capture it

☐ Phone reminder ☐ Calendar ☐ Note ☐ Voice memo

One “burner” I can try to free

_____

One person who can help

_____

Good days are not a demand to do more.

Capacity can change. Tools and rest can help you work with the day you have.

About Project TBI

Project TBI shares lived-experience education, practical tools, and conversations about life after traumatic brain injury. The aim is to make invisible challenges easier to understand and help people find workable strategies.

The Burner Theory offers a way to talk about mental load. It is a supportive illustration, not a proven clinical theory or a diagnosis. People with brain injuries have different needs, strengths, and recovery paths.

Explore more

ProjectTBI.com

Share this guide with a family member, friend, support group, therapist, or anyone who wants to better understand what cognitive overload can feel like.

Remember less. Capture more.

Understanding creates empathy. Practical tools create breathing room.

Educational information only. This guide is not a substitute for professional medical advice, assessment, or treatment. If symptoms are new, severe, or suddenly worse, seek medical guidance.