



Reality rehab

We spend an alarming amount of time staring into our screens. At work, at home and even on the train – we shift our focus from the ‘real world’ to one that exists behind backlit glass. Not only does this make us oblivious to things going on in reality, but our preoccupation with our digital devices could also be making us stressed, tired and unhappy. ELENA IACOVU speaks to the experts about the perks of shutting down, logging off and signing out.

Could phone FOMO – or fear of missing out on a single notification, text or Instagram opportunity – be the next big thing in anxiety-related illness? In the Internet age where we are constantly plugged in and signed in, and when our brains are hardwired for commenting, liking, posting and sharing, it almost certainly could be. Recent surveys by Pew Internet Research found that 67 per cent of people find themselves checking their phones for messages or calls, even if they don't hear their phone vibrating or ringing; 74 per cent of adults say that they use social networking sites and 44 per cent say they slept with their phone or tablet next to their bed for

fear of missing notifications and calls. Technology has accelerated our pace of living by making us available 24/7, and we're worried that if we switch off for even a little while that we'll be left behind. "We are programmed to be available – to our jobs, our friends and our families – and often feel a heightened sense of responsibility as a result," says Lesley Seeger, staff therapist at Northwestern University. "This stems from the fact that we think we'll be seen as a weak communicator if we don't respond right away, or that we lack commitment, and so it becomes hard to just turn off our phones."

In spite of the pressure from friends, employers and followers, you cannot live your life looking through a 14- by 7-centimetre screen (the approximate dimensions of an iPhone 6 – FYI). In fact, research has shown that technology could be affecting our connectedness with our real world. In a recent national stress poll conducted by Lifeline Australia it was revealed that stress impacts a staggering 90 per cent of Australians; psychologist and author of *The Off Switch: Leave on Time, Relax your Mind but Still Get More Done* Professor Mark Cropley explains that our inability to switch off and



unwind in our downtime could be one of the main causes. “By engaging with our digital devices, in our downtime we aren’t giving the body and mind time to unwind and relax, which means we’re placing more stress on the system,” he says.

Indeed, studies tell us that stress from being always on – known as tech stress – increases the potential of depression and anxiety, and can also lead to heart conditions and obesity. Contrary to popular belief, a constant attachment to our devices also contributes to levels of loneliness as well as unhappiness and life dissatisfaction. Research from Swansea and Milan universities found that when heavy internet users go offline they experience withdrawal symptoms similar to those experienced by drug users – an indication of Internet addiction. “Although we do not know exactly what Internet addiction is, our results show that around half of the young people we studied spend so much time on the net that it has negative consequences for the rest of their lives,” says Professor Phil Reed of Swansea University’s Department of Psychology. “When these people come offline, they suffer increased negative mood – just like people coming off illegal drugs like ecstasy. These initial results, and related studies of brain function, suggest that there are some nasty surprises lurking on the net for people’s wellbeing.”

With things such as decreased mood and a creeping sense of social isolation as likely side effects, it should come as no surprise that research has also shown that ‘detoxing’ from technology is hard. But if you are seeing independence from your smart phone, tablet and laptop – as well as an increased sense of connectedness with the world around you – a digital detox is worth it. Cropley says, “When we’re able to withdraw and control the time we spend online, we will feel more relaxed, calm, energised and connected with what’s important.”

Rid your life of digital dependence

A recent digital detox experiment by Kovert Designs found that after three full days of disconnection, people experienced improvements to their posture, their relationships with the people around them, had improved memory and even

began thinking about ‘the big picture’ more – contemplating career and relationship changes. However, you don’t necessarily need to go tech cold turkey to experience the benefits of being offline.

An industry report by Digital Down Under showed that 13.4 million spend a whopping 18.8 hours a day online. Considering that the average working day is around eight hours (according to the latest stats from the Australian Bureau of Statistics), that means we could shave off around 10 hours of Internet usage in our working week downtime.

“Gradually withdrawing from our digital devices and preoccupying ourselves with active activities which shift our focus and keep our mind involved – like exercise, sport, or a hobby – is the best approach,” says Cropley.

STEP ONE: log off and stay logged off

Productivity and time management expert Barbara ‘The Time Tamer’ Clifford suggests we begin preparing at the office. “Prioritise your workload and make sure you address all urgent matters in a timely manner. This way you’ll be confident that you’re on top of things and work won’t impose upon your downtime,” she says. “About 30 minutes before you leave, begin organising your desk – complete your last important task, file your work,

UNWINDING RITUALS

by Kevin Jankelowitz (centredmeditation.com.au)

BELLY BREATHING:

- Lightly place one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly (for feedback)
- Take a deep breath in, feeling your belly rise as you do so (your chest should remain relatively still)
- Breathe out fully, feeling your belly gently recede (your chest should remain relatively still)
- Continue steps 2–3 for three to five minutes.

SIMPLE MEDITATION:

- Sit comfortably (ideally upright, without the head supported)
- Bring your attention to your breath either at the nostrils, chest, or wherever you notice it
- Simply witness the breath, without trying to control it in anyway
- As you realise that you are engaged in thought, gently guide your attention back to the breath without judgement
- Repeat steps 2–4 for as long as you have set your meditation for



and wash your mug. This is your unwinding ritual, where you're physically and mentally signalling to your system that you're cooling down."

Once we have logged off, physically and mentally, there is the question of resisting the urge to log on again once we're out of the office. Founder of Centred Meditation Kevin Jankelowitz says, "Once you finish work, switch off your phone and make the most of your commute home. Spend your time on the train or in the car focusing on your breath rather than on your phone screen, which will psychologically calm your whole body."

"The moment you get home, spend a few minutes sitting in silence and solitude – meditating. This will help you put a break between work and personal life, and will set you up for a relaxing evening."

STEP TWO: make it a habit

Allocate yourself windows of time to be 'technology free' – giving yourself permission to feel no sense of obligation to your emails, messages or social media accounts – is the next state of digital independence. Our experts recommend making meal times and moments with family or friends a device-free zone. And, when going out, make it a habit to switch off the Wi-Fi connection and place it on silent. "When work culture expects you to stay connected, the idea is to structure the timeframe you spend working so you can maximise down time," says Cropley. "In the same way you plan your work time, plan your 'on' and 'off' times, including on the weekend."

"The same principle applies with entertainment and social media use – monitor your use and once you've reached your 'contract' time, get everything to do with work and technology out of the way – out of sight, out of mind; that way you won't have any reminders of work lying around or be tempted to log back in."

STEP THREE: keep technology out of the bedroom

Let's just say that technology and sleep don't get along well. Even the briefest flashes of bright light – a short as two milliseconds – can hinder sleep. This is because our circadian rhythm – our natural sleep-wake cycle – is altered by exposure to light,

BEATING DIGITAL WITHDRAWAL

It's easy for online time to creep back in – here's what the experts say you can do when the urge arises:

- Examine the reasons you want to log back in, write them down and look at them rationally.
- Become aware that engaging with social media is a sign of procrastination or distraction from something else you really want to do. Take a holistic approach and place higher value on things like physical and mental health.
- Notice what actions or thoughts trigger you to log back in. Without judging the situation, once you become aware of your unconscious habits, start replacing them with a more desired outcome.

“ SPEND YOUR TIME ON THE TRAIN OR IN THE CAR FOCUSING ON YOUR BREATH RATHER THAN ON YOUR PHONE SCREEN, WHICH WILL PSYCHOLOGICALLY CALM YOUR WHOLE BODY. ”

which is why it's harder to get out of bed when the days are shorter. A means of regulating this cycle is 'sleep hygiene' – or creating a routine around sleep designed to help you nod off easily. "To get a restful sleep it's a good idea to switch off all electronic devices at least one hour before you go to bed and engage with something that's relaxing and calming, like listening to music, rather with something that's stimulating, like video games," says Centre for Sleep Research researcher Dr Siobhan Banks. "If you have a TV set in your room, remove it; you should also charge your phone in another room; and, if you're using your phone or tablet to read a book, turn down the light to the device, or better still use a dim light from a night stand. All these things not only affect us biologically but also psychologically."

Dr Banks also warns against taking too seriously the results of your sleep tracker device. "Too many people report being very stressed over the results their trackers give them. The numbers are not always accurate, so take the results lightly," she says. If you have any real concerns see your doctor. **NH**

