

Unplug obsession with technology

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Check out the aisles at the local home improvement centers and they're filled with the tools of the season – mops, sponges, dust rags and storage bins.

And why not? After our eternal winter, there's nothing better than the clean slate borne from a good spring cleaning.

But while many of us plan to give our homes a thorough once-over right about now, far fewer are thinking about clearing out another untidy aspect of our lives: our ever-increasing obsession with technology.

Much like that candy bar that calls to us from the vending machine in the middle of the afternoon, we feel drawn to the instant gratification that comes from sharing our quirkiest moments with Facebook or tweeting our latest rant on Twitter. We don't just eat our meals – we post a photo to Instagram first.

All the while, we're waiting for validation in the form of likes, retweets and responses, the tangible signs that yes, someone really likes us.

Is it any wonder that researchers from the Pew Internet Research Project found 67 percent of mobile device owners check their phone for messages, alerts or calls even if they don't notice their phone ringing?

A digital diet

With the days stretching longer and warmer, there's a chance for us to take advantage of the blossoming world around us – that is, if we can put our phones down long enough. That's why some health experts suggest a digital diet – even as short as a few hours once a week – can help restore our perspective and reorient our priorities.

This year, the annual Screen-Free Week, sponsored by the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, will take place May 5-11. Families are encouraged to take a pledge to turn off the screens they use for entertainment and take in the world around them.

It can be an adjustment, but the transition from instant communication via a screen to being present in the moment doesn't have to move us backward, said Dana Harron, a psychologist in practice in Washington, D.C.

"People think they will not feel connected if they're not constantly checking. But really, it's an illusion of connectedness," said Harron, who previously worked at the Delaware Psychiatric Center. "It's this fear of missing something that can cause us to actually miss what's going on around us."

Toxic habit

Nine in 10 American adults have a cellphone, according to data released in January by the Pew Internet Research Project. Almost 60 percent have a smartphone, and 42 percent of us have a tablet.

Think all that connectivity isn't a big deal? Tell that to the 29 percent of cell owners who describe their mobile devices as "something they can't imagine living without."

If the thrill of getting that text feels a little addictive, you're right, Harron said. Every time you check your phone and find a message, your brain responds with a surge of dopamine, the feel-good chemical that contributes to our sense of well-being. We like that feeling, so we keep checking.

"It becomes part of your habit," she said. "But it's a toxic habit."

Given that, it's no wonder so many of us are bleary-eyed in the morning. Pew researchers found 44 percent of cell owners say they have slept with their phone next to their bed because they didn't want to miss any calls, text messages or other updates. But even with all this access, many of us still don't feel like we're accomplishing much, said Amanda Cook, who founded Wellpreneuronline to help businesses focused on wellness grow their business.

"Social media contributes to this feeling that there's always more to do. It adds to the running to-do list in your head – posts to read, people to connect with and a fear of 'missing out' on the latest updates," Cook said. "You focus more on the to-do list in your head and wanting to get back to check the updates than you do on the people around you."

Wrong message

When our eyes are glued to our phones we miss chances for personal interaction and moments that can become memories. We also might be inadvertently sending the wrong message to people when our mobile device is constantly within grasp, said April Masini, who writes the "Ask April" advice column. For example, someone on a date who whips out his phone every few minutes might be giving the impression of always being on the lookout for a better option.

"There was a time when parents told kids to put books away at the table and husbands and wives practiced feeling dejected when newspapers being read separated them at the breakfast table. Now, it's electronics," said Masini, who posts her advice column at

AskApril.com

. "If you create an electricity-free zone around your table at home, you'll begin building the discipline and good manners that will set you and your family apart from those who haven't caught on yet."

Spring provides a great opportunity to clear out old habits and instill new ones, said Zachary Schaefer, an assistant professor of speech communication at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. But those changes don't have to be overwhelming. Start small, such as an hour or two, and build from there.

Schaefer was able to carve tech-free time into his life by creating what he calls "dead zones," times where he doesn't access technology.

People often worry they won't be able to be reached without having their phone close by, but the reality is that there are plenty of other ways to stay in contact without this technological tether.

"We've got email and we have computers," Schaefer said. "And there's always the other people around you who have a phone. We're not out of reach."

It isn't easy

Of course, for many of us, shedding our digital addiction isn't as easy as hiding our phones, especially since there are myriad technological distractions around us.

Dan Young is a professor at Wilmington University who teaches doctoral students about social media and e-commerce. He started an annual Facebook fast a few years ago after teaching his students about the "stickiness" of websites like Facebook, which result in mindless interaction and lost time.

He's planning another Facebook break in the coming weeks, but he admits it's become increasingly difficult to maintain his three-month fast. The problem isn't just the temptation to know what everyone else is doing, but just how ubiquitous the site has become.

"That's how everybody gets in touch with me," Young said, adding his students access Facebook as a digital address book of sorts and prefer to use it for group work.

As a result, he's got a game plan for this upcoming social media break – he's relying on an assistant who will log into his account and check his messages, then email them to him. That way he avoids the distraction of the site, which he admits has sometimes colored the way he looks at his friends and what they post.

"I'm a better person when I'm away from Facebook," he said with a laugh.

None of this means heading back to dial-up modems or writing handwritten notes to express your fondness for a friend’s new hairstyle. Instead, experts say, think of ways to use social media to augment your interaction with others, rather than be the sole form of communication.

“I like the idea of using it as a reward for yourself because it puts social media in the right place,” Cook said. “It’s a way to connect with our friends, but it shouldn’t stop us from making progress in our work and our lives.”

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DETOX TIPS Here are tips from April Masini of “Ask April”: • Relinquish your electronics to a gatekeeper. Make one person in your family the keeper of the key to the closet, where you lock up the phones, tablets and computers for an afternoon or a day. • Head to the library, museum, a play or movie. Follow it up with a family meal that has no cell phones at the table. • Plan a physical activity together, like a hike, a swim or a bike ride. You’ll get your endorphins going. • At the end of the scheduled break, make plans to do this again the following month.

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