Unplugging in a Tech-Saturated World

Regardless of whether you feel it, your brain and eyes probably are experiencing information overload. Learn why and how to cut down on screen time and other uses of technology.

BY JAMES PEARSON

I often joke about how much I enjoy living in the future. Many things I once considered science fiction — like microwave ovens, cleaning robots, video calls, and wrist communicators — have become reality. Today, all from screens, we check social media, browse news, read articles, communicate, work, play, and control our homes, vehicles, and appliances, and we have artificial intelligence (AI) digital assistants that can engage in natural conversations, analyze data beyond our capabilities, and help with everyday tasks.

Technology has permeated our lives. Almost everyone carries a "phone" that has more processing power than entire rooms of computers did when I started in this business 35 years ago, and making a phone call has become one of the least common uses of these devices.

As convenient and innovative as devices with screens might be, they're not without adverse effects. Let's explore some trends related to screen time usage, potential detrimental effects of screens, and some practical ways to manage and limit screen time.

What's the Trend?

I remember a much-touted statistic from when I was a kid (though I never knew who the statisticians were): most people watched around four hours of TV (old-school television — with a tube and no remote) each night. Of course, that was after an eight-hour workday in a more screen-free generation. As you might have guessed, we *do* spend more time now engaging with the world via a screen: some people spend 12 hours (or more) per day in front of a screen between all their devices. On average, we spend 6 hours and 40 minutes online daily, including entertainment, news, and sports. As the demand for tasks requiring a screen increases, so does the time we spend in front of screens.[1]

What's the Toll?

When I was growing up, my parents would warn me, "Don't sit too close to the TV screen, or you'll go blind." Were they right? Does screen time indeed ruin eyesight and rot our brains?

There's significant evidence that computer use does cause eye and health issues. Computer vision syndrome can include dry and irritated eyes from lack of blinking, headaches, and neck and back strain. Research from The Ohio State University indicates that people blink half as often when looking at screens, causing significant eye strain.[2]

Excessive screen time can lead to sleep issues; the blue light emitted can disrupt sleep patterns, leading to insomnia and sleep deprivation.[3]

Additionally, one study noted that adults with more than six hours of screen time daily faced increased odds of developing depressive symptoms and correlated screen time with a greater risk of moderate to severe depression among U.S. adults.[4]

Excessive screen time has been linked to substance use disorders, long-term mental health

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issues, and an increased risk of brain diseases such as dementia.[5]

Social Media's Role

Of the 6 hours and 40 minutes per day spent consuming internet-based media, 2 hours and 20 minutes of that, about 35%, is spent on social media.[6]

I recently watched the Netflix docudrama *The Social Dilemma* after a client recommended it to me. It discusses the effects of social media, featuring interviews with tech experts who warn about the products they helped create.

The film highlights the infamous little red notification dot, which, like other notifications, is designed to evoke FOMO (fear of missing out) and grab our attention, pulling us back in. Social media platforms are purposely designed to keep users engaged with the content to sell more advertising and perpetuate the cycle of addiction.[7]

The Internet of Things and its Role

Intelligent, internet-connected, even AI-driven appliances are becoming part of our everyday lives. Having a robot that effortlessly glides around my home, vacuuming and mopping, is no longer something out of *The Jetsons*. The internet of things (IoT) connects us to technology in ways that force reliance on screens for tasks that previously didn't require them.

I recently bought a new dishwasher. Like my fancy all-in-one laundry machine, it's packed with software that requires logging into an account and downloading an app to access many features.

I recently tried to program the thermostat in our new home, and it kept asking me to connect to the internet for its "full features." It's funny — one of those so-called full features is changing the date and time! The device cannot be programmed without connecting to the internet, which then requires an app and the creation of an account (which itself is a security risk) with the manufacturer.

In addition to complicating devices that seemed easier to use before they became "smart," these devices require software updates to protect against hackers' exploitation.

And lest you think I'm joking about your devices spying on you and posing a security risk to your home and business, I'll share that CompTIA reports that there are over 24 billion smart devices active on the internet and that factors such as bloated software, no planned patching or upgrade path, and simple human error can make these devices susceptible to cyberattacks. These attacks, much like those aimed at law practices, have a goal of stealing data, using the appliance owners' equipment to perpetrate other crimes, or hold the appliance owner at ransom.[8]

Technology has forced us all to become network administrators in our work and personal lives, requiring more time in front of a screen. As an IT professional, the more I learn about the risks of IoT devices, the more I wish to return to simpler times when I used a switch, not an app, to turn on a porch light.

15 Practical Ways to Unplug

How can we unplug? How do we regain some time and physical and mental health and still survive in our highly tech-infused everyday lives? Here are 15 practical ways to unplug, even for a little while.

1) **No phones at the table**. My daughters' friends often found it fascinating that we enjoyed dinner together nearly every night at our dining room table. With rare exceptions, phones were not allowed. The same applies for the conference room table at the office: set a culture and expectation that no phones are allowed.

2) **Switch to analog.** I have found that using a notebook, pen, and paper in meetings helps me disconnect from screens. Playing physical board games is not only a great way to socialize but also a way to limit technology. Instead of engaging with screens, consider doing something like building a puzzle or a model. You'll be amazed at how a hobby requiring mental focus and physical attention can distract you from social media and screens for hours.

3) **Establish pre-bedtime routines**. Research emphasizes that screen time, especially before bed, disrupts sleep because of the blue light emitted by screens. Recommendations include turning off screens, including e-books, at least two hours before bedtime. Choose alternatives like the Kindle Paperwhite (which isn't backlit) or traditional paper books.

Don't forget about the LED lights from devices that can interfere with sleep. Cover or turn off unnecessary lights; for example, I have covered nonessential power indicators with electrical tape to minimize nighttime distractions.[9]

4) **Use an old-school alarm clock**. Vintage digital alarm clocks typically use red LED lights, which are less disruptive than blue light. Better still (and more nostalgic) is one of those clocks with rotating plastic numbers. If you can find one at a thrift store, it could be a great addition to your nighttime routine.

5) **Make it difficult to connect**. In 2022, my daughter and I took a three-week sabbatical in Guatemala. To minimize interactions with my office, I disabled and uninstalled my email and Teams applications. I also turned off notifications and alerts on all my devices. I had informed my staff that they could call if they needed me, so there was no need to constantly check for potentially important emails.

Checking my email was cumbersome, requiring logging into an account and going through the multifactor authentication (MFA) process. This extra hassle reminded me that I didn't need to check my email as often as I used to.

6) **Disable notifications.** By turning off the dings, beeps, buzzes, vibrations, banners, badges, and dots, you can focus on what you want when you want rather than being distracted from the task at hand. While some notifications can be helpful, you might prefer to check apps for deals at your convenience. This approach also helps you reduce spending.

7) **Leave it behind**. In the car. At

home. Simply leaving the device out of reach and inaccessible is one of the most effective ways of disconnecting. My out-of-office reminder informs others that I am currently unavailable and provides instructions on reaching my office and administrative staff, who can always contact me in an emergency. (This helps with separation anxiety.)

8) **Remove it.** Uninstall any unused or distracting apps to eliminate unwanted notifications, maintenance needs, and security risks. Each app adds complexity to your device and can increase the potential for cybersecurity breaches.

9) **Stop the doomscrolling**. Remember the rest of the internet? Stop the doomscrolling by avoiding social media in the first place. Searching for the information and news you want is an active task. While the internet itself can still be a black hole that sucks away your time, you'll be avoiding the distractions purposely designed by social media to hold your attention.

10) **Change your home page.** I typically have one or two browser tabs open while working. Most browsers now include news aggregation services that deliver content similar to what I would find on social media platforms. These services can be just as distracting as social media. You can adjust your browser settings to disable these features, allowing you to open a blank page with only a search bar when you launch a new tab or window. This helps you avoid distractions and stay focused on your tasks.

11) **Set limits.** Setting limits on screen time, whether regarding the amount of time spent using devices, the types of activities performed on screens, or establishing tech-free times and locations, is a common strategy. My wife and I enjoy dining out, but we find it frustrating that even upscale restaurants often have screens. This makes it hard to unplug and connect, so we prefer to eat at places without screens.

12) **Use tech to fight tech.** Several apps are available that can remind you to take breaks throughout the day, such as standing up to stretch or stepping away from your computer screen. These apps can also help you track your screen time to understand your usage better. You can achieve similar results by taking breaks on your own. Consider setting a calendar reminder or a timer on your phone to prompt regular breaks and stretching.

13) **Switch to grayscale.** A new tactic I've encountered multiple times is to set your phone to grayscale. Grayscale is less stimulating for our brains than color, making it less engaging. You can find these settings on an iPhone by searching for "Color Filters" in the settings; on an Android, look for the Grayscale filter in Bedtime Mode.[10]

14) **Make a phone call.** While texts, snaps, posts, pings, chats, and video calls are all great ways to stay connected, they all involve looking at a screen. Try going old school and using your phone for a voice call to keep in touch.

15) **Always out of the office**. To reduce your anxiety about leaving your technology behind (or turned off), consider setting up out-of-office replies or adding a line to your email signature indicating that you only check emails twice daily and will respond afterward. Alternatively, you could instruct people on how to reach your staff, who can contact you anytime they need assistance.

Conclusion

Screens have undoubtedly transformed our lives in remarkable ways, but we've reached a point where unregulated usage can lead to significant physical and mental health issues. By being aware of screen time and seeking opportunities to unplug, we can foster healthier habits and create more fulfilling connections with the world around us.

Taking time away from screens can help rekindle relationships, engage in physical activities, and rediscover the joys of the offline world. It's a deliberate choice we must make in this tech-saturated environment to ensure that while we benefit from technological advances, we do not lose sight of our health and happiness. **WL**

ENDNOTES

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[9]Mindel & Yuhas, *supra* note 3.

[10]John Bradbury, *How to Turn Your Phone Screen Grayscale across Android and iOS*, Android Police (July 18, 2023), https://www.androidpolice.com/how-to-activate-grayscale-on-mobile/. **WL**