We hate to say it, but we’re drowning in tech. And while Gen Z and millennials are often the blamed culprits for ‘spending too much time on their phones’ with the ‘inability to connect offline’, the same goes for baby boomers, too. On a typical day, the average person spends about 3-5 hours on their phone. In a single workday, we pick up our phones around 58 times with each session lasting about 2-10 minutes. What’s more, at least than 30 minutes per day is lost to endless scrolling. Every generation has a clear reliance on tech, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. It’s wonderful to live in a society where the world is pretty much at our fingertips, but if we let our screens own us without taking charge of our productivity, there could be some serious consequences.

A MINIMALIST’S APPROACH

The latest craze for reducing our digital footprint is digital minimalism. It’s a philosophy developed from Cal Newport’s book published in 2019, Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World. Minimalism is about making intentional use of the everyday—whether that’s in fashion, beauty, material items, lifestyle choices, etc.—and digital minimalism follows the exact same approach. Newport stresses that understanding our digital habits is the first step in becoming a digital minimalist. It’s not about going on our phones or internet less. It’s about “optimizing activities that strongly support things you value, and then happily missing out on everything else.” It’s tucking “the fear of missing out” (FOMO) away by focusing on what digital activities provide optimal value.

Technology isn’t bad. Social media isn’t bad. And—you guessed it—the internet isn’t bad. The humans who use it, on the other hand, may need a reality check. "Technology is an amazing tool, but sometimes we forget it’s just that, a tool,” says Dr. Mark Mayfield, CEO of Mayfield Counseling. “We’re the most connected generation in history and yet we are lonelier than ever.”

Tech is a tool for connection. But as our brains have developed in the age of tech, our habits have started becoming mindless, not purposeful. Mindlessly scrolling Instagram looking for that boost of adrenaline, making impulsive purchases on Amazon, or keeping up with work via professional messaging apps—everything is on our phones. You can’t get away from your screen even if you tried. Your life is on there.

Dr. Tim Bono, psychology professor at Washington University in St. Louis, recognizes it, too. “It’s important for us to be wise consumers of technology and understand it’s not whether we use it, but the ways we use it that can really have implications for our overall well-being,” Bono says.

"IT’S IMPORTANT FOR US TO BE WISE CONSUMERS OF TECHNOLOGY AND UNDERSTAND IT’S NOT WHETHER WE USE IT, BUT THE WAYS WE USE IT THAT CAN REALLY HAVE IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR OVERALL WELL-BEING.”

—DR. BONO
Removing technology cold-turkey isn’t the solution to the problem. We are the problem, and we need to understand our habits to create solutions that best suit our lifestyles.

**THE ‘WHY’ BEHIND THE ‘WHAT’**

One of the first steps in addressing our tech reliance is understanding what we have and why. Likely the most versatile piece of tech out there—the smartphone—houses our social media apps, email, bank accounts, fitness trackers—the list is endless. And it’s likely the biggest cause of day-to-day anxiety because of the surplus notifications we receive from friends, work, and daily productivity apps.

Before eliminating apps and training our brains to think more minimally about our tech, we first have to come to terms with our usage.

“There are apps on your phone that tell you how much time you spend on it and provide a journal of how often you check it,” Dr. Bono says. “The simple act of observing the behavior is all about holding yourself accountable. That sense of accountability can be very effective in keeping one on track with becoming more mindful and using technology in ways that are less harmful to us.”

After facing the music and coming to terms with how many hours a day we waste on screen, we can start placing value on what’s absolutely essential and start ditching what’s useless. An addict’s digital detox, so to speak.

“If you’re using technology to stay informed about what’s going on in the world, using it as a way to learn about opportunities to be involved in the community, connect with people, and stay in touch with others, that can be a great thing,” Dr. Bono says.

News, fitness, banking, and reminder apps can be great uses of technology. It helps you stay on track and manage your lifestyle in a way that wouldn’t otherwise be possible. Still, it can be effortlessly easy to mindlessly click through these apps only to find yourself five minutes later wondering why you opened it in the first place. This especially goes for social media—the biggest culprit of them all.

Joni Siani, assistant professor of media and communications at Manhattanville College, recommends organizing your on-screen apps to keep your mind accountable. “Whether that’s putting all of them in a folder or removing them all together, it takes your brain that extra step of going, ‘Do I really want to open this?’,” Siani says. “It’s about taking that extra step to implement mindful strategies.”

Once you start thinking about why you’re using your phone and what apps are essential for enhancing your everyday, you can start to practice more mindful strategies for maintaining a digital detox.

**THE MENTAL HEALTH SACRIFICE**

Maybe the phrase “the world is at your fingertips” is a little too real nowadays. Everything you could possibly learn is at the hand of Google. What’s more, apps are even teaching us how to be more productive, whether that’s training our bodies to run a 5k, keeping track of important events and daily to-dos, or scheduling appointments. When used for keeping up with the push and pull of life, tech is great. In fact, it’s probably made us the most productive society there is. Still, it comes at a price.

Semi-tasking is the new multitasking, making our minds spin every which way trying to keep up with everyday to-dos. As a result, the tasks we accomplish are completed half as well as they could be if 100 percent of our attention was focused on one thing. We’re still alive, but we’re barely breathing trying to consume it all at once.

The same goes for social media. Our bodies crave connection to the outside world. We have an inherent sense of belonging, and technology helps us fulfill this need. “Every text, every like, goes to the hardcore of our DNA which is to bond with another person,” Siani says.
Social media is the epicenter of virtual connection. Instagram lets us share our best photos, Facebook communicates our day-to-day feelings, and Snapchat lets us send funny tidbits of our day through 10-second photos. And while it makes us feel uber connected to everyone around us, it can also create feelings of deep sadness and loneliness. It has, and still is, becoming a game of “who wore it best,” where we’re constantly looking at grass that’s greener on the other side.

“If we’re only focused on how many likes we get on social media, that is a form of social comparison,” Dr. Bono says. “We wish that we get more likes or otherwise get more recognition on social media by other people and that inherently inflates bad self-image.”

It’s completely normal to feel a sense of disconnect when scrolling through Instagram or Snapchat. Next time you catch yourself going down a path of despair while on social media, think about the why behind the what. What type of content makes you feel lonely? Is this content essential, or can you go without it? How can you limit your interaction with this content? Once we’re able to recognize toxic feelings, we can start creating mindful habits to take control of our tech.

“Take a second and think: ‘why is this important to me?’” Dr. Bono says. “Think about your mental health or side effects that are coming as overuse of this technology. Once you think of why it’s important for you, change the behavior so that you have more time to spend with friends, do your work, or prevent yourself from falling into the trap of social comparison that might lead to anxiety or sadness.”

HABITUAL FIXES

If you haven’t caught on by now, digital minimalism is all about creating mindful habits. For the apps on your phone, start by compartmentalizing them. Like Siani suggested, categorize them by function and next time you go to open an app, your brain will take an extra second to question why you need it in the first place. Training your brain to think before it takes action is a great first step in minimizing useless screen usage. Monitor your sleeping habits, too. The blue light emitted from screens not only drains your eyes, but it keeps your mind awake for hours on end if you sleep with your phone, consider tucking it under a pillow or putting it under your bed to avoid unconscious reaching. You deserve a full 8 hours of sleep without wondering what’s going on online, so put it as far out of reach as possible.

It’s also important to remember that your brain is more powerful than you think. It’s constantly being conditioned based on the habits you perpetually implement, so take the extra time to think about what you want from your digital cleanse.

“My motto is that you’re human, you have all the apps you need when it comes to connection and it’s about developing that autonomy so you’re relying on your own capabilities,” Siani says.

Practice makes perfect, and this absolutely goes for implementing mindful digital habits. Nearly five, if not more, hours per day are spent on screen. And while this statistic doesn’t tell us what we’re doing on our phones everyday, understanding where we’re throwing our time can help us weigh what’s worth it and what’s not.

“The parts of the brain that grow, change, and develop in relationships don’t get the chance to grow if we’re always hiding behind technology,” Dr. Mayfield says. “When they don’t grow and develop like they should we enter into arrested development or delayed development relationally and emotionally.” We don’t need to feel guilty for however long we spend on our phones, but we do need to understand why we’re on our phones to stop unhealthy habits in their tracks. There’s no right or wrong way for becoming a digital minimalist. You’re the owner of your tech, so take charge of your habits and start living a fuller life. ♦

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