

digital decluttering

WORRIED ABOUT YOUR PHONE ADDICTION? CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST CASSANDRA DUNN EXPLORES HOW SPENDING LESS TIME ON OUR DIGITAL DEVICES CAN HELP US LEAD CALMER, MORE PRODUCTIVE AND MORE MEANINGFUL LIVES.

words CASSANDRA DUNN

The vast majority of us would be lost without our smartphones. Some surveys have found we spend well over three hours every day on our phones (and then there's all the other screen time we clock up on our computers or binge-watching Netflix on TV). If you're compulsively reaching for your phone in every idle moment, or if you have a hard time leaving home without it, you probably have what's called a moderate behavioural addiction. Unlike other addictions, you might not be in danger of losing your house over it, but you're almost certainly losing hours of productive time, missing important moments and reducing your brain's capacity to sustain attention on a task.

The challenge for most of us is that our smartphones perform important functions beyond messaging and social media. Music, podcasts, fitness and meditation apps, and even your calendar are all right there at your fingertips, so of course we consider them an essential accessory. The problem is that we live in what's known as an attention economy, which means tech companies have designed the apps on your phone to keep you glued to your screen for as long as possible. It's no accident that when you pick up your phone to check the weather, you somehow lose the next 40 minutes of your life to the abyss of the internet and social media.

If you think it's time to downsize the role of digital devices in your life, I'd like to share a few tips as a starting point for regaining control...



What might you be capable of if you weren't spending three hours every day staring at a small screen?

Check your screen time

In the same way keeping a food diary can highlight your poor eating habits and uncover your weak spots, monitoring your screen time can provide important feedback about your regular phone use. These days, Apple iPhones and Google Android phones have an inbuilt function that tracks your daily use and allows you to set limits either on specific apps or overall. You'll quickly see where you are losing the most time every day, which can help you to know where you need to be more vigilant with setting limits.

Turn off notifications

The allure of a little red bubble notifying you that someone has engaged with you online can be difficult to ignore. (Did you know it's red for a reason? Again, those clever software engineers know exactly what they're doing when it comes to hijacking your attention.) A great way to take back control is to go into your phone's settings and turn off all those pesky notifications. If that makes you anxious, ask yourself if it's really necessary for you to be notified the very second someone has liked your Instagram photo or sent you a message. In most cases, it definitely is not.

Limit accessibility

It's the ease of access that keeps us compulsively picking up our devices, swiping and scrolling. By removing the most time-consuming apps from your phone, such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram (your screen time app will tell you where to start!), you reduce some of that allure and begin breaking those habits. Of course you can still log on from your browser, but that's far less portable, so you're likely to see an immediate drop in time-sucking social media use.

Create phone-free zones

With smartphones creeping into every area of our lives and becoming so seemingly indispensable, it's important to create clear boundaries if you're intent on limiting technology use. A phone-free zone might be a physical space such as the bedroom or the dinner table, or it might be during certain time periods, such as between 5pm and 7pm on weekdays. You can use your phone's 'do not disturb' function to stop calls and messages coming in overnight. Making this a shared rule within a household helps to keep everyone accountable and encourages the kind of quality face-to-face communication that's on the decline.

Take a Kon-Mari approach

In his book *Digital Minimalism*, academic Cal Newport suggests the best approach is to undertake a thorough digital declutter. Unlike a detox, which is generally viewed as a short-term break, decluttering means completely removing optional technology from your life for a designated period (e.g. 30 days) and then, starting from a base of zero, adding back only what you consider to be essential and, importantly, in line with your values. This minimalist approach creates a genuine opportunity to live life without digital distractions and find other, more fulfilling ways to spend your time. Not only that, it encourages you to ask the bigger questions, not just about your phone habits, but about what matters to you and how you want to be living your life. What might you be capable of if you weren't spending three hours every day staring at a small screen? It's certainly a question worth considering. 📱