



I JUST CAN'T QUIT YOU, TECHNOLOGY!

WHY PEOPLE ARE TAKING A BREAK FROM TECHNOLOGY—AND WHY IT'S GOOD FOR YOUR BRAIN, YOUR HEALTH AND YOUR RELATIONSHIPS. by Amy Klein

■ Science fiction once predicted that robots and machines would take over our lives. Considering our reliance on our gadgets, that might not be too far from the truth. How many times a day do you check your cell phone? Your Facebook page? Your Twitter feed? How many texts do you send and receive each day? Now tally up the time you spend in front of screens—from your computer to your iPad to your TV—and you'll see how technology is running—and maybe even ruining—your life.

Some people have joined in on the National Day of Unplugging, which will take place March 23–24. Founded by the Sabbath Manifesto, a creative project designed to slow down lives in an increasingly hectic world, the unplugging is meant to mimic the religious sabbath, where work ceases so you can become closer to your family, friends and spiritual life. Others are trying “technology fasts”—sporadic breaks at different times from various technologies.

Here are eight reasons why it's good to take a tech break:

1. TECHNOLOGY CAN CAUSE STRESS

“The purpose of almost all technology is to do things faster, and often better, than we humans can,” writes Jim Calloway, co-editor of *Winning Alternatives to the Billable Hour: Strategies That Work*. Although the promise of technology used to be that it would lighten our load, it often increases it—by giving us more time, we now have more time to work. “We can, and therefore do, run at a faster pace. And if you let technology set your pace, it will be make you run faster and faster.”

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2. TECHNOLOGY CAN RUIN YOUR HEALTH

Researchers who surveyed over 4,000 American high school students last year found that excessive texting and social networking—sending 120 text messages or more during a school day, and using online social networking sites for at least three hours per school day—was linked to a range of poor health behaviors, including smoking, drinking, use of drugs and sexual activity. These were the results of a study led by Dr. Scott Frank, director of the Master of Public Health program at Case Western Reserve School of Medicine. Dr. Frank presented the findings at the 138th Annual Meeting & Exposition of the American Public Health Association in November 2010. In addition to the aforementioned, “hyper-texting” and social networking was also linked to perceived stress, having suicidal thoughts, obesity, disordered eating behavior, missing school due to illness, having lower self-rated health, feeling unsafe at school, not getting enough sleep, and parental permissiveness.

3. TECHNOLOGY CAN REWIRE OUR BRAINS

“We know that the brain’s neural circuitry responds every moment to whatever sensory input it gets and that the many hours people spend in front of the computer—doing various activities, including trolling the Internet, exchanging email, video conferencing, IM’ing and e-shopping—expose their brains to constant digital stimulation,” write Dr. Gary Small and Gigi Voran in *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind* (HarperCollins, 2009). Dr. Small and his UCLA research team wanted to look at how much impact this extended screen time was having on the brain’s neural circuitry, how quickly it could build up new pathways, and whether or not they could observe and measure these changes as they occurred. Using fMRIs, they compared computer users to “naïve” (non-computer) users and found that after five hours on the Internet, the naïve subjects had already rewired their brains. “This particular area of the brain controls our ability to make decision and integrate complex information. It also controls our mental process of integrating sensations and thoughts, as well as working memory, which is our ability to keep information in mind for a very short time—just long enough to manage an Internet search task or dial a phone number after getting it from directory assistance.”

4. TECHNOLOGY CAN RUIN OUR ATTENTION SPANS

Dr. Gary Small and Gigi Voran also write in *iBrain* that the high-tech revolution has put us into what software executive Linda Stone calls “continuous partial attention,” which means continually staying busy—“keeping tabs on everything while never truly focusing on anything.” This differs from multitasking, where there’s a purpose for each task and we’re trying to improve our productivity and efficiency. “When paying continuous partial attention, people may place their brains in a heightened state of stress. They no longer have time to reflect, contemplate or make thoughtful decisions. Instead they exist in a sense of constant crisis—on alert for a new contact or bit of exciting news or information at any moment.” According to Small and Voran, once people get used to this state, they tend to thrive on perpetual connectivity. Eventually, they say, the endless hours of unrelenting digital connectivity can create a “unique type of brain strain.” Many people who have been working on the Internet for several hours without a break report making frequent errors in their work. Upon signing off, they notice feeling spaced out, fatigued, irritable and distracted, as if they are in a “digital fog.” They call this a *techno-brain burnout*.

5. TECHNOLOGY CAN HINDER CREATIVITY

In the book, *Defeating the 8 Demons of Distraction: Proven Strategies to Increase Productivity and Decrease Stress*, Dr. Geraldine Markel, PhD, gives an example of how technology ruins the creative process—and the work process: “Steve is extremely bright and creative. He enjoys surfing the Internet and discovering new ideas. As a word or concept pops into his mind his fingers tap him into uncharted territory. Four or more hours can fly by. Unfortunately, these Internet explorations distract him from completing his projects. On the one hand, Steve is an ‘idea generator’ at a public relations firm, so he needs to keep abreast of new developments. On the other hand, he still has to complete his projects.” When not controlled, she writes, Steve’s “curiosity” becomes a hindrance and erodes his performance and potential.

6. TECHNOLOGY CAN INTERRUPT ROMANCE, FRIENDSHIP AND PARENTING

Do you really need a scientific study to prove this? Just check out the look on your child/spouse/friend or colleague’s face when you sneak a look at your Blackberry while they’re talking to you. “Research and various studies have demonstrated the importance of attachment to other people on how well we cope with life, feel safe in relationships, and manage stress,” writes John O’Neill, director of addiction services at the Menninger Clinic in Houston, in “Time to Disconnect? Technology overload damages relationships, but is it an addiction?” (Highlights of the American Bar Association, Winter 2008). “Furthermore, we know that children who suffer from attachment disorders struggle with trust, superficial relationships, poor peer relationships, lying, fear of intimacy, shame, and feeling alone.” O’Neill gives an example of a father and son at a baseball game, where the father is too busy talking on his cell phone to notice his son’s attempt at catching a home run. “What could have been a significant bonding moment was derailed by the father’s inability to disconnect from technology,” he writes. “Observing people on a daily basis, it is easy to recognize how lost we have become in our own worlds. Talking on the phone, returning messages, playing games, listening to music on headphones that block out the world and other examples illustrate how easy it is to escape.”

7. TECHNOLOGY CAN BE ISOLATING

“Mobile phones, computers, and other such tools enable us to communicate so easily, they trick us into believing that we will be able to satisfy our communication needs when, at best, they are able to give us only a small portion of what we actually need,” writes Harley Hahn, who coined the phrase *Island Syndrome* to define our state of isolation and dependence on technology today. Technology continually seduces us by promising to give us what we want, and we don’t understand what is happening. “This is why so many people keep phoning, text-messaging, instant messaging, and emailing one another without ever feeling satisfied enough to stop: It is a combination of seductive technology, bad communication habits, and ignorance of our real needs. We are betrayed continually by a confluence of forces that promise to fulfill us without actually doing so.”

8. TECHNOLOGY CAN BE AN ADDICTION

According to a phone survey conducted by Stanford University back in 2006—before the crazed Twitterverse!—more than one in eight adults in the United States showed signs of being addicted to the Internet. “Addicts” showed signs of compulsive Internet use, habitually checking email, websites and chat rooms. More than 8% of the 2,513 respondents said they hid their use from partners. “We often focus on how wonderful the Internet is—how simple and efficient it can make things,” elaborated lead author Dr. Elias Aboujaoude, clinical assistant professor in psychiatry and behavioral sciences and director of Stanford’s Impulse Control Disorders Clinic. “But we need to consider the fact that it creates real problems for a subset of people.”

In the end, technology is not evil—like anything else, it must be used in moderation. As O’Neill writes, “Technology has enormous benefits that assist us on a daily basis. Cell phones help us keep up with family, friends, and business and assist us in an emergency. The Internet is a wonderful resource filled with knowledge and endless learning opportunities. Evidence shows that video games can improve various motor skills and problem-solving skills. The hope is that we can apply technology with a healthy balance and set limits.” **E**



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