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How to take a break from your phone, email, and work

Being constantly connected to our work and smartphones makes us feel vaguely stressed and anxious. It prevents us from focusing and thinking deeply, and from spending time on the things that bring us lasting joy. It's good to take a break.

But taking a break can be hard to do, because our smartphones and social media and email are *designed to be addicting*. (If you think you aren't addicted, I challenge you to take this quiz: <https://virtual-addiction.com/smartphone-compulsion-test>.) It doesn't work for most people to just will themselves not to check their phones or their email.¹ Below are a few strategies to put some distance between yourself and the things that are stealing your attention.

1. **Get an old-fashioned alarm clock and banish all devices from your bedroom.** Your bed and bedroom are not for working (or checking social media, or watching Netflix). They are for sleeping and resting and connecting with your partner if you have one. Don't let your phone, and potentially your work, be the last thing you do before you go to bed and the first thing you do when you wake up.

Say goodnight to your phone and computer at least *one hour* before you'd like to be asleep. Do this so that you are able to sleep deeply and wake up rested. Charge your phone outside of your bedroom, and set it to *automatically* go into do not disturb mode an hour before your ideal bedtime.² Set your computer up to automatically shut itself down at the same time every night.

2. **Get a good book to read before bed.** It's important to replace the time you would have been on your phone with something that will capture your interest, but not keep you awake.
3. **Plan and schedule two or three specific times to check your email – strategically – per day.** Block off enough time to get all the way to the bottom of your inbox in one way or another. If you need five hours (or three hours, or twenty minutes) a day to deal with your email, fine, but make sure you've actually blocked off those five specific hours on your calendar (or three hours, or twenty minutes) every day. Now do the same thing for checking social media, if you want to do that every day, and for checking and responding to your texts.

Set up an app like "Inbox When Ready" to deliver email only during your scheduled times. You'll still be able to access your email (in case you need to retrieve a file or something), but you won't be tempted to check for new emails until your scheduled time...because you'll know that *there are no new emails*. This is like methadone for email addicts, because it takes all the reward out of checking.

¹ If you want to learn why, read Catherine Price's excellent little guide called *How to Break up with Your Phone*.

² I actually turn my ringer ON at night when I put it in the charger. That way if one of my kids wants to get ahold of me in the middle of the night, they can call twice and "break through" the do not disturb mode.

4. **Turn off all your alerts.** Every. Single. One. Unless you are actively checking your email/texts/social media during one of your scheduled times, you don't need to know what communication is coming in. So turn off all notifications for your text messages, email, and all of your social media feeds on your desktop, laptop, tablet, and smartphone. Vibrate counts; turn it off. Breathe. Even if, through the strength of your ironclad will, you are able to resist reading a message that comes in, if you see or hear or feel a message notification, your brain has still been interrupted by that alert. Even a millisecond attention hijack like this will make you less focused, less able to resist other temptations, and more irritable.
5. **Reorganize your phone** so that it is less addictive. This will help you stick to your scheduled checking, and will help you not get sucked in when you don't want to be on your phone. Move all the most addictive apps (like social media and email — and *anything you check compulsively or on a whim when you see it*) off the homepage. Put them in folders on back pages so that you have to search in order to launch them. Don't worry, they're still there. They just won't be constantly seducing you with their siren songs.
6. **Tell your people what you are up to.** Tell your friends, family, and coworkers that you're going to be checking your email and messages strategically, at pre-scheduled times during the day. That way, when you don't respond to their messages, they will know it isn't personal.

Give people a way to get ahold of you if something urgent comes up. This is more for you than for them, so you don't worry about what emergency you are missing out on. Finally, and this is the most important one, ask your people to help hold you accountable. Consider this a form of crowd-sourced willpower.

7. **Practice bringing your attention back to the present moment.** This is what the famous Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer termed being "mindful" more than 25 years ago. To Langer, mindfulness is the "simple act of actively noticing things," and she's shown that it results in increased health, intelligence, and happiness. So wherever you are, whatever you are doing, look around and really notice things: What is different in your environment? In the people you are with? In your own body?
8. **Feel what you are feeling.** Without email, social media, and messages as your constant companion, you'll find yourself doing things like standing in line at the grocery store...just standing...staring into space. Perhaps dying to check your phone. This may be uncomfortable at first. Resist the temptation to numb this discomfort by, say, eating that whole box of cookies you've got in your cart.

Why? Because when we numb unpleasant feelings, we numb *everything* that we are feeling. So to honestly feel the positive things in life — to truly feel love, or joy, or profound gratitude — we must also let ourselves feel fear, and grief, and frustration.

If you are feeling anxious or excited or bored, let yourself FEEL that emotion. Surf your emotions like waves.

Where in your body does the feeling live? Is it in the pit of your stomach? In your throat? What, really, does it feel like? Does it have a shape, or a texture, or a color?

Breathe. You are strong enough to handle the feelings that come your way.