

Digital Detox Guide



How to Prepare for a Technology-free Weekend

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Introduction



Do you check your email, texts, voicemails, Facebook, or Twitter feed within an hour of waking up or going to sleep? While you're in line at the store? During dinner with your family? Would you check it at a church while waiting for a funeral to start?

Do a little thought experiment with me here. Imagine yourself sitting in a public place, not doing anything, just staring into space. How would you feel?

Although many of us spent most of our childhoods daydreaming, adulthood seems to be about trying to keeping our minds from wandering, and trying to stay on task. Maybe we let ourselves space out in the shower...but even that is often short-lived, as we try to hustle ourselves back on track, lest we waste any more time or water.

Rarely do we just let ourselves stare into space these days. Look around: We can't even stand to wait at a stoplight for 10 seconds without checking our smartphones. Why not? Because it's uncomfortable for us not to be doing anything. At the very least, it's boring.

More than being boring, however, downtime and daydreaming are threatening to our sense of self. If busyness and multi-tasking and being pressed for time can be equated with significance, success, and productivity then downtime and daydreaming must be signs of insignificance, failure, and inefficiency. And when we feel insignificant and unsuccessful, we also tend to feel guilty for not working, ashamed that we aren't important enough to be doing something, and anxious about our status.

The part of our brain which is so very hungry for novelty knows that the stimulation it is looking for is right there!! In your pocket!! Just pull out your phone and see!!

In the lab, these emotions are more painful than the actual physical pain of an electric shock.

I'm endlessly fascinated by a series of studies led by Tim Wilson where the research subjects were put alone in a room, with nothing to do. The researchers describe their work:

In 11 studies, we found that participants typically did not enjoy spending 6 to 15 minutes in a room by themselves with nothing to do but think, that they enjoyed doing mundane external activities much more, and that many preferred to administer electric shocks to themselves instead of being left alone with their thoughts. Most people seem to prefer to be doing something rather than nothing, even if that something is negative.

You read that right: Many people (67 percent of men and 25 percent of women, to be exact) actually gave themselves painful electric shocks instead of just sitting there doing nothing—after they had indicated to the researchers that they would

pay money NOT to be shocked again. One guy shocked himself 190 times in 15 minutes.

When we can't tolerate the feelings that come up when we aren't doing anything, or when we can't tolerate a lack of stimulation, we feel uncomfortable when we have downtime. As a result, we forfeit our downtime and all its benefits by seeking external stimulation, which is usually readily available in our purse or pocket (rather than an electric shock machine). Instead of just staring out the window on the bus, we read through our Facebook feed. Instead of being alone with our thoughts for a minute, we check our email waiting in line at the grocery store. Instead of enjoying our dinner, we mindlessly shovel food in our mouths while staring at a screen.



THE BENEFITS OF UNPLUGGING

In the grand scheme of things, digital usage rarely leads to meaning or fulfillment. But unplugging for at least one day per week will make you happier (in addition to giving you hours and hours to do the things that bring meaning to your life).

Here's why:

1. Detoxing from social media and digital information promotes overall well-being and mental health. Social media use is associated with [narcissism](#), [depression](#), [loneliness](#), and [other negative feelings like anger, envy, misery, and frustration](#). So, it's hardly surprising that taking a break for a few days can improve our mood and overall happiness.
2. Your sleep will become more [restorative](#), and sleep improves everything from health and happiness to performance and productivity. Physiologically, you'll have an easier time sleeping because the low-energy blue light emitted by our tablets and smartphones stimulates chemical messengers in our brains that make us more alert and suppresses others (like melatonin) that help us fall asleep. In addition, you'll have an easier time sleeping because you won't be exciting your brain with new or stimulating information right

before bedtime. Social media, messages, and email can easily trigger the release of adrenalin, which makes it nearly impossible to fall asleep quickly. And needless to say, the less time it takes you to fall asleep at night, the more time you'll have in the morning.

3. Bonus: You'll feel less lonely and more connected, and [feeling connected is the best predictor of happiness that we have](#). Though we think social media makes us feel more connected to others, ironically, it can also make us feel [quite alone](#). Seeing friends and acquaintances post about how happy they are can actually trigger feelings of misery and loneliness, [research shows](#).

The benefits of unplugging from time to time are clearly enormous. But if unplugging isn't undertaken properly, people often experience withdrawal symptoms, like feelings of agitation, guilt, and a compulsive and distracting desire to check our phones.



THE SCIENCE OF CHECKING

[One survey](#) found that 80% of 18 to 44-year-olds check their smartphones within the first 15 minutes of waking up—and that 89% of younger users, those ages 18-24, reach for their device within 15 minutes of waking up. Seventy-four percent reach for it immediately after waking up. A quarter of those surveyed could not recall a time during the day that their device was not within reach or in the same room. [Another study](#) found that people tend to check their email about every 15 minutes; [another found](#) that in 2007 the average knowledge worker opened their email 50 times a day, while using instant messaging 77 times a day—imagine what that might be today, over a decade later, now that smartphones are ubiquitous and given the evidence that we spend more time checking than ever before.

So, we check our smartphones constantly. Is that bad?

[A study of college students at Kent State University](#) found that people who check their phones frequently tend to experience higher levels of distress during their leisure time (when they intend to relax).

Similarly, [Elizabeth Dunn and Kostadin Kushlev](#) regulated how frequently participants checked their email throughout the day. Those striving to check only three times a day were less tense and less stressed overall.

Moreover, checking constantly reduces our productivity. All that checking interrupts us from accomplishing our more important work; with each derailment, it takes us on [average about a half hour](#) to get back on track.

People who check their phones frequently tend to experience higher levels of distress during their leisure time (when they intend to relax).

So why do we check constantly, and first thing in the morning, if it just makes us tense and keeps us from getting our work done? Because it also feels, well...awesome. The Internet and electronic communications engage many of our senses—often simultaneously. All that checking excites our brain, providing the novelty and stimulation it adores. So even though disconnecting from the devices and communications that make us tense and decrease our productivity seems like a logical thing to do, your novelty-and-stimulation-seeking brain won't want to do it. In fact, it will tell you that you are being more productive when you are online and connected to your messages than when you are disconnected and focusing on something important.

This point is worth lingering on: how productive we are does not correlate well with how productive we feel. Multitasking and checking a lot feel productive because our brains are so stimulated when we are doing it. But it isn't actually productive; one Stanford study showed that while media multitaskers tended to perceive themselves to be performing better, they actually tended to perform worse on every measure the researchers studied.

Much of our checking and busyness, to paraphrase Shakespeare, is all sound and fury, no meaning or significance. You can sit all day in front of your computer checking and responding to email but accomplish not one of your priorities. It may

feel like a more valuable activity, because it feels more productive. But it is neither.

Now that we've established the benefits of unplugging and the dangers of checking, here's how to unplug in a way that will lead to the best weekend EVER.

Step 1: Make a No-excuses Plan



1. **Tell your friends, family, and coworkers that you're doing a digital detox over the weekend.** That way, when you don't respond to their messages, they will know it isn't personal. (If they aren't supportive, ignore them — unplugging is threatening for the technology addicted.)
2. **Give people a way to get a hold of you, if need be.** This is more for you than for them, so you don't worry about what emergency you are missing out on.
3. **Ask your friends and family to hold you accountable.** Give them permission to openly ridicule you for posting on social media or messaging them in any way, including email. (Consider this a form of crowd-sourced willpower.)
4. **Make specific plans for your day unplugged** (see suggestions below).

5. **Break out your analog tools, so that you aren't tempted to turn your phone on.** Print out paper maps, find your camera, set an old-school alarm clock, etc. Print out a list of phone numbers you may need (use of landline phones for actual conversations are fine during a detox, in my opinion). Check a book out of the library or visit your local bookstore so that you have a printed book to read. Figure out how to listen to your music without accessing a device or the internet (we have an old iPad that does the trick in our household). In other words, eliminate any need for your devices.

Step 2: Hide the Candy



Even if you have stronger-than-average willpower, you will not be able to unplug from technology through the sheer force of your ironclad will. You are going to need to make it very, very inconvenient to plug back in. Trust me on this one — although the steps below may seem extreme, they are 100% necessary.

1. Let your device and computer batteries run out.
2. Put your devices and computers away, where you can't see them or reach them easily. Without their chargers.
3. Now put all the chargers in a totally different place. We are trying to make plugging in as inconvenient as possible. If you think you are going to be tempted, give the chargers to someone else to hide.

This is obviously an “out of sight, out of mind” tactic. Think of it this way: If you were trying to eat less candy, would you carry a bowl of it around with you? Would you put it on your nightstand and reach into it first thing in the morning? And then carry it with you to the bathroom to eat while you are on the toilet? And then set it next to you while you try to eat a healthy breakfast? And then put it on your dashboard? I didn’t think so.

Do you check your email before you get out of bed?

If you are using your smartphone as an alarm clock, you’re probably tempted to check your messages before you even get out of bed. Is this really the best way to start your day? Maybe it is. Perhaps checking your email is your highest priority, and you have time for it before breakfast. Perhaps working with your head still on the pillow doesn’t disrupt your sleep and you can actually do good work that way.

If that isn’t you, however, you aren’t alone. Most people do much better work when they put off checking their email until they are actually at work. Here’s an easy solution. Bury your email application on your phone in a folder on a back page. That way, when you turn off your alarm, you won’t see your email icon, and you won’t see how many emails you have. This is akin to hiding Halloween candy from your children so that they don’t start begging you for a piece first thing in the morning, when they see it. If that strategy doesn’t work (because you are, um, addicted), remove your email from your phone altogether for a few months, or use an old-fashioned alarm clock until you’ve kicked the habit.

Step 3: Treat Withdrawal Symptoms



Going unplugged for one day over the weekend will send many people into withdrawal. They will literally experience jitters, anxiety, and discomfort akin to physical pain. If you were in rehab for Opioid addiction, they might give you medication (like Methadone) to ease the pain.

Unplugging is like a detox because the symptoms we experience when we stop checking our phones compulsively are uncomfortable; remember, many people would rather receive a painful electric shock than stand the pain of not checking, of not being “productive.”

If you need rehab, here’s how to invent your own methadone. The idea is to do something naturally rewarding for your brain to ease the boredom, anxiety, and general twitchiness that tends to descend upon us when we unplug from technology.

Here are some ideas:

- **Make plans to do something new and exciting.**

It's better not to go cold-turkey on all the novelty-seeking brain activity that comes with checking email and social media feeds. Find some old-fashioned sources of stimulation.

- **Let the detox work its magic:**

At times, really settle into the stillness. When you are standing in line at the grocery store, for example, you'll just be standing there, staring into space. This may be uncomfortable at first. Resist the temptation to numb this discomfort by eating, say, that whole box of cookies you've got in your cart.

Why?

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. Trust me on this one, there are a lot of benefits to feeling your feels, even if they aren't pleasant.

So if you are feeling anxious or excited or bored, let yourself FEEL that emotion. Where in your body does it 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?

- Whether you are experiencing stillness or doing something stimulating, practice being really, really present — or what the famous Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer termed “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 physical or emotional state?
- Pretend you're about to move out of town, and spend the day seeing the friends you'll miss the most, in your favorite places. This is an ingenious suggestion from psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky, author of *The How of Happiness*.

Lyubomirsky and her colleagues tested the pretend-you're-moving tactic by asking research subjects to imagine that they were moving in a month, and to spend their weekend accordingly. Participants "were happier and more appreciative of the people and places around them than those who were just told to keep track of what they did each day," according to writer Emma Haak. Lyubomirsky explained: "They savored their time more when it felt finite."

- Connect in REAL life with as many people as you can. This is important enough to say again: our positive relationships with other people are KEY to our happiness, and feeling connected is critical for your optimized weekend.

Even if you are an introvert, reach out to people around you. This can mean making plans to spend time with your friends and family, but it doesn't need to be all weekend.

Connecting with others is also about making an effort to interact with people you randomly come across throughout the weekend. Maybe it's the checker at the grocery store, the barista at your local cafe, or a stranger you pass on the street. Research shows that short, simple encounters—even if they're with someone you may not see again—can make you feel connected to the broader community around you.

Unplugging can be daunting, for sure, but millions of people spend their weekends multi-tasking, overworking, and compulsively checking their phones so much that they fail to enjoy the life that they've worked so hard to create. I'm glad that you won't be among them this weekend!

5 Ways to Stay on Your Digital Detox

Unless you are some sort of superhero, you will not be able to cure yourself of your internet/device/email addiction perfectly the first time. So what to do if you're struggling?

1. Don't get too emotional about your slip or succumb to self-criticism.

Instead, forgive yourself. Remind yourself that lapses are part of the process, and that feeling guilty or bad about your behavior will not increase your future success.

Instead of giving yourself a mental lashing, comfort yourself. To follow-through on our good intentions, we need to feel safe and secure. When we are stressed, our brain tries to rescue us by activating our dopamine systems. A dopamine rush makes temptations more tempting. Think of this as your brain pushing you toward a comfort item . . . like the snooze button instead of the morning jog, onion rings instead of mixed greens, or that easy taxi to work rather than the less-than-comfortable urban bike ride. So sometimes the best thing that we can do to help ourselves unplug is to preemptively comfort ourselves in healthy ways. What makes you feel safe and secure—and doesn't sabotage your detox efforts? Perhaps you need to seek out a hug or take a walk outside.

2. Figure out what the problem is.

This may be blazingly obvious, but in order to do better tomorrow, you'll need to know what is causing your trip-ups. What temptation can you remove? Were you stressed or tired or hungry—and if so, how can you prevent that the next time? Figure it out, and make a specific plan for what to do if you find yourself in a similar situation again. What will you

do differently? What have you learned from your slip?

3. Beware the “What the Hell” effect.

Say you’ve sworn not to check your email before breakfast, but you’ve been online since your alarm went off...three hours ago. You’re now at risk for what researchers formally call the Abstinence Violation Effect (AVE) and jokingly call the “what the hell effect.” If you’ve already blown your plan today, why not go hog wild? What the hell—you can begin again tomorrow, right? Wrong. The more damage you do during your technology binge, the more likely you are to slip again the next day, and the less confidence you’ll have in yourself that you can change. So as soon as you notice you’ve slipped, go back to your plan. Double down, friends, double down.

4. Rededicate yourself to your detox (now, in this instant, not tomorrow).

Why do you want to make the changes that you do? How will you benefit? Do a little deep breathing and calm contemplation of your goals.

Lapses are part of the process. Feeling guilty or bad about your behavior will not increase your future success.

5. Beware of moral licensing.

This is a potential landmine to avoid on your better days: as you notice how well you are doing staying unplugged, don’t let yourself feel so good about the progress you are making that you unleash what researchers call the “licensing effect.” The licensing effect occurs when we behave virtuously and then “cancel out” our good deeds by doing something naughty. When we behave in line with our goals and values—whether it’s as large as staying unplugged for an entire vacation or as

small as not talking on the phone while you are checking out at the grocery store—we ironically risk backsliding. Consciously or unconsciously, we tend to feel that healthy or virtuous activities entitle us to partake in less-good activities. Smokers will smoke more, for example, when they believe they've just taken a vitamin C tablet. Similarly, philanthropists tend to give away less money after they've been reminded of their humanitarian attributes. One study even found that after people buy eco-friendly products, they're more likely to cheat and steal!

Avoid the licensing effect by reflecting on your goals and values rather than your accomplishment. Why have you decided to turn your phone off during dinner time? What larger mission are you trying to fulfill? How will you or others benefit from the habit you are working on? Questions like these can help us avoid self-sabotage.

Practices to Aid Your Detox



TAKE “RECESS”

If you are still feeling overwhelmed and time-starved on your detox, what you need more than time to work is downtime. You need a BREAK.

So, take a good old-fashioned recess. Go ahead and do your chores or whatever you need to do, but after about sixty to ninety minutes of focused attention, take a break. Rest.

What do you find relaxing or rejuvenating? Is there an article you’ve been wanting to read for fun? Does your most vivid fantasy involve a nap? Perhaps you long to go outside into the great outdoors and let the sun shine on your face. Just do it. The only rule is that what you do during recess must be restful or playful; it can’t be on any

task list anywhere. Anything that you have to do anyway (shower, read an article for work) doesn't count.

Need more ideas? Try driving in silence, with your radio and phone off.

(Encourage your children to look out the window while you drive them, instead of down at their devices.) Take a walk outside, preferably in nature, without a phone or music player. If that's too hard, just try a few minutes at a time, adding a few minutes each day. Just practice; it'll get easier, and the benefits will become more apparent.





EAT MINDFULLY, EVEN IF YOU ARE SUPER BORED

Eating while reading isn't usually a good idea if we want to be productive, creative, or just plain happy. Like meditation, mindful eating brings loads of benefits. For example, Elissa Epel, director of the UCSF Center for Obesity Assessment, Study, and Treatment, led a study that showed that the more mindfulness women in her study practiced, the more their anxiety, stress, and deep belly fat decreased.

Even when (actually, especially when) we feel too busy to stop working for lunch, we tend to gain increases in our productivity by doing so. And in the process, we are able to better access the part of our brain that makes us more creative and better problem solvers. But you don't have to trust me (or the science) on this one: Just try it and see.



SPEND SOME TIME STARING INTO SPACE TODAY

If we want to be high-functioning and happy, we need to re-learn how to do nothing. When we feel like there isn't enough time in the day for us to get everything done, when we wish for more time... we don't actually need more time. We need more stillness. Stillness to recharge. Stillness so that we can feel whatever it is that we feel. Stillness so that we can actually enjoy this life that we are living. Here's what you need to do in order to experience that stillness: Nothing.

Well, not nothing: Keep breathing. Sit in a comfortable position or lie down. Now: Stare into space. If you start feeling bored or antsy, that's normal. Just notice what you are feeling. If you start feeling sleepy, that's okay; just notice if you are starting to fall asleep. Don't judge yourself.



TAKE A NAP

I know. I know! I know what you are thinking right now: Now you're really pushing it, lady. You WANT to take a nap. You may even understand intuitively what a great idea this is. But you OBVIOUSLY CAN'T just nap at will!! PUHLEEZE!

I'm guessing that there is a little part of you that still believes that your success is a function of effort, of the time you spend actively on the job. The time you spend trying, not napping.

But if you have a job that requires that you think, at all, then the quality of your thinking matters. Right?

Turns out that one of the most efficient and effective ways to improve the quality of our thinking in the afternoon is to take a 20-minute power nap. According to Ron Friedman, an award-winning psychologist and the author of *The Best Place to Work*,

Our biological need for rest is no less pressing than our biological need for food or water. When we're tired, less blood flow reaches the areas of our brain that are critical to thinking. We're also less capable of forming long-term memories. Sure, we can power through the midday slog when we need to—but only at a reduced level of functioning.

A 20 or 30-minute power nap will improve your thinking and decision making, enhance your creativity, and elevate your mood. It will also increase your alertness and improve your accuracy and attention to detail. All of these things, obviously, will increase your productivity. If you have time to run out for a cup of coffee, you have time for a power nap.



TELL YOUR PEOPLE WHAT YOU ARE UP TO

Emerson once wrote, “The glory of friendship is not the outstretched hand, nor the kindly smile nor the joy of companionship; it is the spiritual inspiration that comes to one when [we] discover that someone else believes in us and is willing to trust us.”

You don’t have to be the president to need a cabinet of close advisers for advice and inspiration, so surround yourself with people who can support you. I can’t underscore enough how critical this is for success.

The first and most obvious reason that we need a support team is that our friends and family can help hold us accountable, acting as a bit of external willpower when our self-control falters. This is especially important during a digital detox! Our friends know when we are acting addicted to technology; they can see the timestamp on our emails.

**When
embarking on a
digital detox,
don’t go it alone.**

Most of us care what other people think of us, and when we make our intentions public in some way—even if our public is just an inner circle of close friends—our intentions have more power.

Second, there is a plethora of empirical evidence that we are herd animals, and we typically do what our peers do. (Please don't think you are the exception to this rule. While I don't doubt that you are in many ways a maverick, odds are that you also look and act a lot like your peers in many other ways.) Compelling research demonstrates that our behavior is influenced not just by our friends but by our friends'

friends' friends. Because the behavior of others is highly contagious, we do well when we hang out with people who are already in the types of habits that we are trying to maintain.

Worried that people will see you as unresponsive or slacking if you unplug for 48 hours? [Leslie Perlow's](#) research indicates otherwise; in fact, research suggests that your colleagues will likely notice your increased productivity when you get back to it and see you as more collaborative, efficient, and effective when you reduce constant phone and email monitoring.



MODERN YOGA POSITIONS
#1 - INBOXSAVA:
SITTING DOWN, CHECKING EMAILS

Gemma Correll commissioned by JetBlue for Humankinda

Digital Detox Cheat Sheet

STEP 1: Make a no-excuses plan for your weekend unplugged.

- Ask your friends and family to hold you accountable.
- Give people a way to get a hold of you, if need be.
- Break out your analog tools, so that you aren't tempted to turn your phone on.
Print out paper maps, find your camera, etc.

STEP 2: Hide the candy.

- Let your smartphone, tablet, and computer batteries run out.
- Put all your devices away, where you can't see them or reach them easily.
- Put all of their chargers in a totally different place.

STEP 3: Ease withdrawal symptoms.

- Make plans to do something new and exciting.
- Let yourself feel what you feel, even if you are anxious or bored.
- Practice being mindful (or "present"). Actively notice what is going on around — and inside — of you.
- Pretend you're about to move out of town, and spend the day seeing the friends you'll miss the most, in your favorite places.
- Connect in REAL life with as many people as you can.

Need support with your digital detox?

**Post a question on Facebook or inquire about
coaching with Dr. Christine Carter here:**

<https://www.christinecarter.com/coaching/>