

In a hyper-connected world, where smart technology makes it so easy for us to keep on track with business and in touch with family and friends, are we getting too much of a good thing? **Victoria Wells** explains why it might be time to take a digital detox.

DISCONNECT TO *Reconnect*

+ New Zealanders have a reputation as early adopters of technology, and we have certainly embraced the online world — 64 per cent of us own or have access to three or more devices, while 70 per cent of us have a smartphone.¹ The world is literally at our fingertips thanks to devices that also make us more available to clients and colleagues. But could this constant connection be to our detriment?

Researchers think so. The pull of the online world is such a growing issue that they have termed it 'Digital Addiction'. We are so accustomed to being 'on' 24/7 that it's getting harder to step away.

But there are also signs that we understand the need to unclip the digital leash. We now have access to an array of 'digital detox' holidays and retreats. We can use special jewellery that notifies us of alerts so we can leave our phone elsewhere. The UK even has a National Unplugging Day.

What is digital addiction?

Have you ever been out with friends and glanced at your Facebook page? Or checked Twitter while at the park with your children? Does that make you an addict?

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Digital addiction is described as an increasing dependence on technology that threatens to absorb the user's attention above all else and ultimately have a negative impact.

Humans are social creatures, hardwired to seek out new things. We actually get a physical 'rush' each time a new email, text or alert arrives. A report in *Psychology Today* explains the 'dopamine loop'.² This is a cycle where the dopamine (pleasure transmitter) in our brains encourages us to seek new information — as we are rewarded, the dopamine encourages us to seek more.

"It's a physiological loop we get into, where the seeking out becomes an addictive behaviour," says Auckland-based life coach and author, Louise Thompson. "Research shows that says the average person checks their phone 120 times a day."

How can digital addiction affect you?

This behaviour can prevent us from engaging with the world around us. Our brain's constant search for new information makes it accustomed to multitasking. We can then lose our ability to focus deeply on a task, or on other people.

So while our devices enrich our lives in many ways, they can weaken aspects of them too. Thompson gives the example of leaving your phone face up when sitting with someone. "It's like having a third person at the table," she says. "We feel intruded on. It's like you're saying 'I'm ready and able to switch off from you at any point during whatever you're saying, however important it is.'"

Signs you might need a digital detox

- Do you check your phone during any moment of downtime?
- Do you post a photo or status update as part of any activity or outing?
- Have you ever started using your phone to go online while your partner or child has been talking to you?
- Do you routinely check email and social media in bed before you go to sleep?
- Do you take your phone with you when you eat?
- Do you feel anxious if you don't have internet access?

This behaviour can affect professional and personal connections. "Kids pick up on it and they know their parents aren't being present with them," says Thompson. "I say to clients that you want your mind to be in the same place as your body. How many people are rushing off to do brain surgery, and really have to have their phone on?"

Not having your attention diverted by a device gives you a chance to reconnect more deeply with others, yourself and the moment. "One of the most valuable things we can do to make someone else feel special and important is to give them our undivided attention, because it's getting rarer and rarer," says Thompson.

She says a break from the constant online barrage can also improve work processes. "If it's impacting on critical thinking and the ability to concentrate and focus, then a digital detox is a really good thing to consider."

How do you take a digital detox?

Whether it's a complete break or simply setting some boundaries, the key is wanting to make a change, rather than viewing technology as something to be endured. Thompson recommends looking at what you will connect to, rather than what you are disconnecting from.

"You could be disconnecting in order to connect better with your family... or with your body by going for a walk and connecting with the natural world. So it's not something you're going to miss out on, it's something you're going to gain," she says.

And in that digital silence you may find that a personal or professional revelation you've been seeking comes a little more easily.

References:

1. Research New Zealand. (2015.) A Report on a Survey of New Zealanders' Use of Smartphones and Other Mobile Communication Devices 2015.
2. Weinschenk, S. (2012). Why We're All Addicted To Texts, Twitter and Google. *Psychology Today*. Accessed from:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brain-wise/201209/why-were-all-addicted-texts-twitter-and-google>

DEFINITIONS

DIGITAL DETOX: A period of time during which a person refrains from using electronic devices, such as smartphones or computers, regarded as an opportunity to reduce stress or focus on social interaction in the physical world. *Oxford Dictionary*.

Take a digital break this summer

- Start small. Try an afternoon offline, then extend that gradually.
- Have a phone 'curfew' at night. You'll sleep better, according to Thompson, who says that no one should check their email in bed.
- Disable push notifications.
- Go out without your phone. Or if you're expecting a call, keep it out of sight.
- Put your phone on flight mode if you want to use it for photos.
- Let people know you're going offline for a period of time — #digitaldetox is popular.

If you need to check in with work

- Let colleagues and clients know when you'll be away, but set a time when you can be contacted, or when you'll call to check in.
- Set a time to check emails. Deal with anything urgent and file anything else for later.

What to do instead

- Exercise your brain — use it or lose it. Read a physical book or do a crossword.
- Get outdoors.
- Find a hobby. Do something you enjoy, or learn something new.
- Catch up with friends in 'real life'. You'll find there's more news than just what you've seen on social media.
- Rediscover the art of conversation and listening.
- Spend time thinking. Enjoy the ability to let each thought reach a conclusion without interruption.
- Be present and enjoy each moment.