

## Dependency on Technology

### Know When to Log Off

#### Digital addiction- Is That Really a Thing?

Is there such a thing as a harmful dependence on digital media and high-tech devices? Although not yet officially recognized as a diagnosable disorder, some mental health professionals believe addiction to digital devices and media is similar to substance addictions in that it occurs when technology harms the user's life and is difficult to stop despite the harmful effects.

Internet and computer use have become ingrained in our society and have changed the way we live our lives, learn, and connect with one another. Just last year, data from the Pew Research Center showed that 77% of Americans connect to the internet daily. While surfing the web or binging videos on YouTube may seem relatively harmless, there are some who spend an inordinate amount of time doing so, and this has begun to interfere with daily life. When an action or desire takes precedence over the most important aspects of, or responsibilities in our lives, such as relationships, work, and school, it can become classified as an addiction.



#### The Dopamine Connection

Dopamine is a type of "feel good" neurotransmitter in the brain. Your body makes it, and your nervous system uses it to send messages between nerve cells. Dopamine plays a role in how we feel pleasure. It's also a big part of our ability to think and plan. It helps us strive, focus, and find things interesting enough to do so.

According to addiction expert Dr. Anna Lembke and her book [Dopamine Nation](#), our smartphones are quickly making us dopamine "junkies". Recent studies have shown that phone activity stimulates the release of dopamine in our brains, making us feel temporarily motivated, and happy. For this reason, we tend to turn our attention to technology, especially social media for "quick hits", seeking attention, validation, and distraction. Since our brains are wired to naturally crave dopamine, it's no wonder that we use technology more than the traditional ways of connecting. Technology allows for instant gratification, increasing pleasure, and endless opportunities to be stimulated by whatever we're drawn to.

## So, What's The Problem?



If Dopamine is a “feel good messenger”, then what exactly is the problem? Despite the easy dopamine fix, studies show that we’re actually less happy, and less tolerant of everyday struggles. Additionally, smartphone use has been shown to form neurological connections in the brain in ways similar to how opioid addiction is experienced.

We’ve forgotten how to be alone with our thoughts, and we are less likely to concentrate on difficult tasks or get into a creative flow for long before we need instant pleasure or distraction.

As nice as that “easy digital dopamine” may seem, we’re often spending too much time in our limbic brain, which helps us to process emotions. What we’re lacking is more time in our pre-frontal cortex, which deals with future planning and problem-solving and is important for personality development. Too much limbic brain activity does not help when we’re confronted with a complex or unsettling issue in our work or social lives. Before technology and social media, we naturally learned to tolerate more distress. We were better able to delay gratification, solve problems and deal with life’s daily frustrations. With the bounty of stimuli online, we can instantly boost our mood and we may be under the false impression that we can fully control when we feel joy. But remember, the instant joy we feel is fleeting in the digital world and it may prove to be too much of a good thing.

## Addressing Digital Dependency

Tempering the quick fix that technology provides is two-fold. First, we have to find ways to phase out unnecessary technology. Second, replacing the manufactured dopamine we get from technology with real life pursuits.

### Tempering Technology Use

- Digital Fasting- Try relinquishing your smartphone use in your down time. 24 hours or so initially can help us assess how the loss affects us. How many times do you mindlessly reach for your phone? And how does it feel when it’s not there? Digital fasting over time can also help us to reset those learned pathways in the brain.
- Remove screens from your bedroom.
- Put your phone on airplane mode.
- Commit to only using technology at certain times, such as what is required for work, or establishing a time limit weekly or daily.
- Turn off push notifications, and only answer texts and emails during specific times of the day.
- Don’t expect overnight success. Digital fasting will be rough, at first. But if you can master that, you should be able to go back to use in moderation. It is much harder to go from excessive use to moderate use. The fasting stage is the hardest part.

## Replace the Quick Fix Dopamine with Something More Enduring

- Take a cue from the Dutch. Their practice of [Niksen](#) involves setting aside time each day to do nothing. This allows us crucial time to relearn how to be still with our thoughts and appreciate the simple joy that comes with it.
- Find replacements for some pleasure-seeking vices. Try doing something challenging, such as going for a run, reading a book on a topic you don't know much about, or talking to a stranger. When we engage in challenging activities, we experience a more natural form of dopamine boost after the event, instead of receiving smaller doses beforehand. Not only are earned boosts sweeter, but the pleasure we receive is much more enduring.

While it's natural and healthy to pursue excitement and joy, our current digitalized culture has created the expectation that life is supposed to be 24/7 pleasure. In reality—it's not. And that's ok. Resetting those neurological pathways in the brain will help us to have a more realistic view of the natural balance that exists, and to appreciate the joys much more.

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