

# EXPLORE WELLNESS

## Easy DIY Digital Detox: How to Recharge and Reconnect<sup>1</sup>

Do it all, have it all! Every day we are bombarded with messages convincing us that, with a little help from technology, we can take on the world all by our lonesome. The cold, hard truth: It's not the healthiest way to live.

Sydney Loney (2018) shares the article, *DIY Detox*, in *Best Health*.

A few weeks ago, the little glass spin plate in our microwave oven suddenly stopped spinning. I headed straight to Google, watched a four-minute YouTube video and – voila! - after a quick trip to Home Depot, it was going in circles again. Not long after, I was having some friends over for dinner and downloaded *The New York Times* cooking app just so that I could wow my guests with the silkiest, most Instagram-worthy cherry cheesecake ever to grace a dinner-party dessert plate.



Speaking of going in circles, these days, it's not enough to pack a nutritious, colour-coordinated kid's lunch featuring all four food groups or to perfect the most awkward inverted yoga pose ever; you then need to post the triumphant results on Facebook to prove to the world that, yes indeed, mission accomplished.

"Our generation has gotten stuck in a backlash to our

mothers' rejection of the idea of the domestic goddess," says Katrina Onstad, author of *The Weekend Effect: The Life-Changing Benefits of Taking Time Off and Challenging the Cult of Overwork*. (She seems to recall that her mother owned an apron with "Screw Housework" scrawled on the front.) Onstad says that the pressure to be amazing at everything – from navigating careers to raising kids to making flawless floral arrangements – really took hold with Martha Stewart and the cult of aspirational domesticity that she inspired. And thanks to social media and the power of Google, it's showing no signs of abating. "The Internet has amplified the message that you can't just *have* it all; you can *do* it all," says Onstad.

In the name of wellness it's time to switch off YouTube, shut down Pinterest and delete your self-improvement apps.

But all this perfection comes at a price. **The Canadian Mental Health Association reports that 58 percent of Canadians feels completely overwhelmed by all their roles and obligations, while Statistics Canada says that women are more likely than men to report that most days are “quite a bit” or “extremely” stressful.** (And that’s probably an understatement at best.)

Onstad says that the stress resulting from that drive to do it all has huge implications, from increasing our risk of heart disease to creating sense of social isolation. “Burnout is real,” she says. And boy, are we burned out. That’s why it’s time to stop, re-evaluate and recognize that, yes, we have a problem. And it doesn’t have to be this way. In just five simple steps, you can re-evaluate your goals, scrap your lengthy to-do lists and get a grip on what matters most to you.

**Step 1 - Admit that you have a problem:** When it comes to our obsessive need to do – and post – everything, it’s not always the technology that allows us to do both that is to blame but rather the way we’re using it, says Dr. Katy Kamkar, a clinical psychologist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto. Her biggest concern is that people are using DIY technology to the extreme – and at the expense of other things. “If you’re doing these things to the point where you’re feeling overwhelmed, step back and think about your goals and what you’re trying to achieve,” says Dr. Kamkar. “Ask yourself, ‘Is this really making me more productive or improving my well-being and quality of life?’”

Blaming technology for our troubles takes the onus off learning to act responsibly, says Dr. Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center in Newport Beach, CA. Our devices, apps and social media platforms are simply tools, she says, in the same way that hammers are. She recommends doing a tech audit to evaluate why you turn to these tools so often: Is it to be informed? To connect? To relax? To procrastinate? To be motivated or inspired? And how does it make you feel? Happy, energized and calmer or agitated, annoyed and resentful? “Evaluate how you’re using each tool against the criteria that will best support your goals,” says Dr. Rutledge.



And think about balance, too, says Dr. Kristin Buhr, a registered psychologist and director of the North Shore Stress & Anxiety Clinic in North Vancouver. Thanks to all our devices, we’re never really off duty anymore. “There’s never a chance to regroup,” she says. What’s worse, she says, is that we have a horrible tendency to use multiple devices at once. **“I’ll be watching TV, my laptop is open, I’m texting with a friend and I feel like I’m getting lots done, but I’m not doing anything mindfully,”** she says. **“We’ve lost our sense of balance around technology altogether.”**

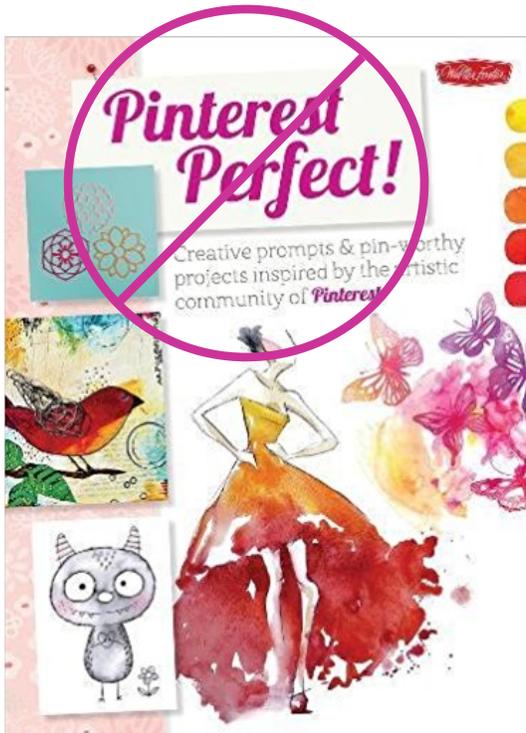
**Step 2 - Strike the right balance:** The perception nowadays is that more information is always better and that you can take control of your life with it, says Timothy Caulfield, a Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy and a law professor at the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta. “There’s this phenomenon that we’re supposed to be constantly improving,” he says, “and if we’re not striving to improve ourselves, we’re somehow living a slightly less valuable life.”

Caulfield says he finds himself falling into the trap, too. An avid cyclist, he eventually stripped all the techy gears off his bike – even his speedometer – just so he could relax and enjoy the ride for once. “Unplugging is definitely part of it,” he says. “I really think we have to accept more of a ‘relax’ mentality.” Caulfield now evaluates every technological intervention to determine whether it will add stress, suck time, be a distraction or cost money. “If it’s going to make my life easier and save time, then I embrace it,” he says. “If it’s not, I don’t.”

We need to start thinking before we auto-click. Sure, it's cool that you can just look online to learn how to cook rice in your new Instapot without burning your way through three batches, says Dr. Rutledge, but feeling like you have to be the master of your domain for every little thing is neither productive nor healthy. "Do I feel like I can fix everything in my house? No. Would I look to see if the solution was within my frame of reference? Probably." She says that while she isn't about to rewire her entire electrical system, she might research it just so that she can have more informed conversation with her electrician. "You have to make adjustments to what you're willing to do and not willing to do," she says. "You need to set boundaries and find a way to manage your time in this new world."

Instead of dropping your devices altogether or taking a "holiday" from them, she recommends deciding where technology helps and where it hinders you. "The solution is to go back to basics, not throw out your phone," she says. "It means asking 'What are the important things in my life and how can I use technology to facilitate them?'"

Sometimes it's just about knowing your limitations. Onstad's daughter saw a birdhouse on Pinterest and wanted to make one just like it. "It was way beyond me, and it was a disaster," says Onstad. She felt as though she'd failed herself and her daughter, not to mention the local bird population. These types of projects can be emotionally exhausting and make you feel as though you're always falling short if you don't get everything just right. "It becomes a way to give you credentials as the perfect mom who can not only hold down a job and raise kids but also build a birdhouse," she says. "Instead of being a form of rejuvenating leisure, many of the tasks we set for ourselves actually become depleting." Onstad says that, at some point, you need to draw a line, and that line will be different for everyone, but draw it you must. **"It's much healthier to find activities that are soothing rather than things that are imposed on you by the impossible standards of womanhood we all seem to be living under now,"** she says.



**Step 3- Pause before you post:** Mixed into our desire to do it all is our need to share our successes on social media. "We're hardwired to care what people think," says Dr. Rutledge. She doesn't see it as a bad thing. "We're continually navigating social environments, and it's destructive not to acknowledge that that's normal," she says. "We shouldn't feel guilty about caring what others think."

But the danger is that we're starting to do things not for our own enjoyment but for some new social media fodder and any recognition it may foster. While social media can be empowering and liberating, Onstad says it can also be oppressive. After writing her book, she felt overwhelmed – and exhausted – by the pressure to post and promote it.

"We're so hooked to our devices that our whole sense of accomplishment and the need to put it on Instagram become a vicious cycle," she says. "You see that your friends are doing it and then you have to keep up." It's all part of the distorted reality that is social media, where constant comparison breeds a whole new level of competition. You

can't just *do* CrossFit anymore, says Caulfield; the whole world has to *know* you do CrossFit. Even just trying to be more active isn't enough on its own. "By wearing a Fitbit, you can Tweet your results and be part of a community that's also monitoring themselves," says Caulfield. For some, the competition can be motivating, but for others it can have the opposite effect. "We make unfair comparisons, and it can make us feel negatively toward ourselves," says Dr. Buhr. The solution, she says, is to **rethink how and why you use social media and adjust accordingly.**

**Step 4 - Outsource:** Just because you can fix your leaky faucet doesn't mean you have to. "You can always hire a plumber," says Dr. Buhr. And, let's face it, when you outsource your problems by calling in a pro, things tend to get done right the first time. It also take the stress off you and frees up your time for things you actually enjoy. When it comes everyday home improvement, Onstad suggests sharing the burden as a family. In *the Weekend Effect*, she writes that "tackling domestic drudgery together makes it less boring for everyone and imparts a message about the values of the home."



And be your own boss. With all of the digital tools and unlimited information at our disposal, we sometimes forget that we're in charge, says Dr. Rutledge. "The tricky thing with all these technologies is that they're so alluring that people get sucked into thinking they don't have a choice," she says. Dr. Rutledge says it's important to view technology as a gift that allows you to give stuff a shot if you want to, but it shouldn't make you feel compelled to do it. If you find it impossible to resist, you can always press the off button. Onstad is making an effort to

distance herself from her devices to preserve leisure time. She found that when she took her dog for a walk without her phone, she walked farther and felt better. "I felt a kind of unclenching of my brain, like a fist opening," she writes. "When I followed the terrible biological reflex of putting my hand in my pocket (who knew I did this three times an hour?), there was nothing there. The burden of the phone in my pocket lifted and it was almost physical; I felt lighter. My mind was allowed to wander, and it did."

**Step 5 – Do nothing:** Doing nothing is really powerful, says Onstad. "It's when you're off and purposeless that the creative breakthroughs come through," she says. "We have to remember that it's not wasted time to be off; it's valuable time." In her book, Onstad reminds people to do less.

"Less shopping, less cleaning, less decluttering." She says people have too much anxiety around free time and feel compelled to fill it. Fight that urge. "Free time almost suggest failure now," she says. "Status is equated with being super-busy, exhausted and overworked. If you have free time, there's almost something suspect about that, which is why we've gotten so good at turning leisure into labour."



Onstad recommends protecting your downtime rather than filling it with make-work projects. She says that all the people she interviewed for her book who were happiest were those who protected their time off and used it for socializing and playing – not for home improvement or self-improvement. "I think we need to approach leisure with the same dedication that we approach our work," she says. **"If we start valuing our free time as much as we do our work lives (and our Pinterest posts\*), we'll start to get better at playing – and at being at rest."**

<sup>1</sup>Loney, S. (2017) *DIY Digital Detox*: Best Health, Dec. 2017/Jan. 2018. \* And our Pinterest posts added.