

Why You May Need to Cut Back on Your Screen Time

Feeling overwhelmed with life. Distracted without a sense of purpose. Overstressed and overanxious. Lonely, without close relationships. Unable to focus, be quiet or hear God's voice. Could your hyperconnected digital diet be causing anxiety?

People have struggled in many of these areas throughout history. But today's world has increased these problems beyond anything humans have experienced in the past. The human brain is being hijacked, sabotaged and manipulated.

And you'll have to fight back if you don't want it to happen to you!

If you're struggling with anxiety, depression, loneliness and similar issues, one critical factor in getting better is to get control of your digital diet.

What's the Problem?

Teens today have never known a world without the internet, social media and being constantly digitally connected. Hundreds, thousands, of messages/alerts keep them distracted, affecting mental health, school performance and personal relationships. Social media has been shown to negatively affect teens self-esteem, among other things.

And it's not just teens. Research has documented that frequent smartphone use can develop brain pathways similar to those produced by opioid addiction. The world's largest companies such as Google, Facebook and others have invested billions of dollars capitalizing on this, designing their products to get you hooked with an addiction-like response. Advertisers are buying your attention through a dopamine hit to your brain every time your phone dings.

And through your phone, the rich advertisers have wormed their way into church services, family dinners, conversations between couples or friends, work and of course sleep.

Only in the last few years of human history have our brains been bombarded with the amount of information and instant connection available today. We are now exposed to:

- Instant viewing of any tragedy or crisis anywhere in the world.
- Billions of dollars spent trying to buy space in your brain through thousands of daily messages.
- Popularity contests for “friends,” “likes,” “comments” and so forth on social media.
- Instant distraction available any time you feel uncomfortable.

And your brain wasn't built for this!

It's no wonder mental illnesses are eating up a larger portion of money, time and energy than ever before. (Of course digital distraction is only one factor, but an important one.)

Toward a Healthy Digital Diet

Returning to the 19th century is not possible, nor would God want us to try. A majority of the ministry I'm privileged to do is digital/online. Technology itself is without morals. It's what we do with it that counts.

The movement toward digital minimalism holds real appeal, especially for people who are wrestling with anxiety and overwhelm. Some leaders have made public the steps they've taken such as going off social media, eliminating almost all smart-phone apps or other actions necessary to achieve focus and mental well-being.

As followers of Jesus, we should be even more concerned about the nourishment our brains take in, and following Paul's

command to “[take] every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5a).

In proposing a healthy digital diet, let me suggest these two questions for any digital/online activity or media or connection you engage in.

- Am I remaining in charge of my mind through this interaction/activity?
- Does this interaction/activity nourish my connection with God and His purpose for me?

Both those questions are important. And here are some simple but important steps I would suggest you consider.

1. Refuse to be bought.

Get mad at those who are spending billions to buy your attention, and determine to fight back.

I turned on screen tracking on my phone; my screen time has averaged 57 minutes/day (on my phone).

Is that good or bad? I consider that less than “bad,” but more than I would like. Surely there are better uses of my time than having my eyeballs glued to a four-inch screen for an hour each day!

Here are some actions to consider:

- Delete problematic apps from your smartphone.
- Use an app to limit your social media and other app use.
- Turn off notifications from every app you can.
- Go on a digital fast—no screens for a Sabbath, or a weekend or a week.
- Declare 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. a no-screen-time period—and hold to it.
- Declare your bedroom and your prayer “closet” digital-free—and hold to it (in other words, don’t take your phone to bed with you!).

- Carry a book with you to pull out while waiting, instead of pulling out your phone.

What actions you take will be determined by where you are most vulnerable. The point is to proactively *choose* what you will do with your eyes, mind and time.

2. Put God first.

Where does your mind go when you first wake up?

If you're like most people, you pull out your phone—often before you get out of bed in the morning.

I found myself in the habit of looking through my phone while waiting for my coffee to percolate in the morning, even before my time with God. There were times I'd get sucked into emails and social media for 30 minutes or more. And that made it hard to focus on God when I "got around to it."

So I changed my practice. I now refuse to open a screen until *after* my quiet time with God in the morning. My mind can find something besides my phone to focus on while I'm waiting for my cup of coffee. And I've found it much easier to focus on Him first when I do get to my quiet place, which changes the color of the rest of my day.

Do whatever it takes to keep other voices at bay until you hear God's voice first.

3. Stretch your focus.

Constant digital distraction has decreased our ability to pay attention.

It's not that we can't; it's that our minds have become habituated to constant movement, entertainment and fluff. Present your mind with a problem, and it immediately looks for a distraction instead. And that impacts learning, relationships and spiritual growth.

You can train your mind to focus again. All it takes is being intentional.

Here's what that may look like:

- Putting phones away during meals and *talking* to your spouse or family.
- Declaring some date nights digital-free.
- Turning off the TV, putting away the phone and reading a book for 30 minutes before bed.
- Setting a timer and remaining totally silent for one minute, two minutes, five minutes in God's presence.
- Leaving your phone in the car when you go to church.

Practice silence. Practice focus. And practice doing your work or study for 60 minutes without allowing messages, social media, email and so on to interrupt.

Is your digital diet causing anxiety? Choose your digital diet thoughtfully. Your mental health, relationships and connection with God will improve.

Your Turn: Are you happy with your digital diet now? What change are you going to make? Leave a comment below. {eo}

Dr. Carol Peters-Tanksley is both a board-certified OB-GYN physician and an ordained doctor of ministry. As an author and speaker, she loves helping people discover the **Fully Alive** kind of life Jesus came to bring us. Visit her website at .

This article originally appeared at .