

# ... SO GIVE YOURSELF AN I-BREAK!

A smart, non-extreme guide to powering down  
more and being present for actual life

By Ellen Seidman

I

If RUSSIAN PHYSIOLOGIST IVAN PAVLOV WERE AROUND TO redo his famous experiment, the one in which dogs salivated when a bell that they associated with food rang, he might use humans and a smartphone. I'll bet the results would show that at the sound of every *buzz!*, *ding!* and *ping!*, people would twitch and then grab their phones.

At our house, my smartphone is considered an appendage. My children joke that it's my third ear when I talk on it a lot and my third hand when I text like a fiend. Some days, there's so much incoming info—emails, instant messages, social-media notifications—that I can't even recall which medium I read it on. Did my friend contact me on Facebook? By text? Wha? Some mornings, I wake up and form tweets in my head.

Polls paint a picture of i-dependency: Americans spend 1.7 hours a day social networking and check their phones some 46 times a day. The result is that disconnecting has become both trendy and a mental-health must-do. We can go on tech-free retreats through companies like Digital Detox (motto: "Disconnect to reconnect"). Ironically enough, a new generation of apps has sprung up to help us resist the siren call of technology. Celebrities, meanwhile, proudly announce that they are signing off. As Kerry



Washington recently posted on Instagram, “It’s time to take a teeny break from social media. Feeling called to be a bit more quiet and still.”

#### WHY DISCONNECT? SOME MOTIVATION

Obviously, technology makes life easier, more fun and more social—within limits. “Do we want to live an i-life or a real life? That’s a choice we have to make,” says Orianna Fielding, the founder of the Digital Detox Company and author of *Unplugged: How to Live Mindfully in a Digital World*. “At the end of the day, it’s a five-inch piece of hardware with no pulse, and we give it more attention than [we do] people we know.”

When we’re overly immersed in social media and Googleland, we’re missing out on real conversations, thinking deeply and creatively, doing restorative physical activities like biking (you’re not texting and biking, right?) and truly connecting with ourselves. One recent study funded by the National Institutes of Health linked high social-media usage to depression. Other research has found that social networking increased people’s anxiety both about how they compare with other people . . . and about being away from their devices.

There are health hazards of virtual codependency as well, aside from the dangers of walking into traffic as you check messages. Tech neck is real: one study found that tilting our head forward 60 degrees to peer at our phones puts 60 pounds of pressure on our neck. Vision fatigue and headaches are also side effects, along with lower-quality sleep.

For those who feel that they absolutely cannot disconnect at work, consider that technology can make us less effective workers. “Your productivity will shoot up and you’ll give your company much better quality and quantity if you’re not always switching between email and your work,” says Joanne Cantor, the former outreach director of the Center for Communication Research at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and author of *Conquer CyberOverload*. “The brain can’t focus on two things at once, so you’re always losing your train of thought.” In one study, in the journal *Computers & Education*, students instant-messaged either before, after or while reading an article. Those who did so while reading took significantly longer to get through the piece.

#### HOW TO POWER DOWN

Truth is, we all know that it would benefit us, body and soul, to disconnect on occasion. But how do we do that in the real world? Here are tricks the experts themselves use to tamp down their tech time.

##### • Pinpoint the time sucks.

We plop down on the couch, start scrolling through Facebook updates, and suddenly it’s two hours later. Where does the Internet time go? You can figure that out with an application like RescueTime, which runs in the background of computers and mobile devices and tracks how much time we spend in certain programs (including email), on websites or in Web browsers. There are free and premium plans. The Moment app, which is free, does the same for iPhones and iPads. Once you’ve identified the big culprits, you will know where to cut back.

##### • Ask: Am I truly enjoying my online activity?

If not, find another. When we take a breather at work to glance at Instagram or Pinterest, it’s what Laura Vanderkam, the author of *I Know How She Does It: How Successful Women Make the Most of Their Time*, calls a “fake break.” As she explains, “These online diversions are not nearly as pleasurable as real-world breaks like talking with someone you like or just taking a walk.” Not to mention the guilt we feel for not, say, crafting capes for a child’s birthday party—call it Pintstress.

##### • Put yourself in airplane mode.

Finding realistic tech-free periods is key to success, and bedtime is a good place to start. The problem is that too many of us are charging our phones on a nightstand or using them as alarms. One survey by the National Sleep Foundation found that 71% of adults have a smartphone, tablet or computer in the bedroom—and close to half keep them on. “If you’re an alcoholic trying hard not to drink, you don’t have open bottles of liquor on the table. Keep the temptation away,” says Cantor. Do the old-school thing: get an alarm clock, and plug that phone in somewhere else—perhaps in another part of your home, as Cantor does.

##### • Do a digital sabbath.

That’s the term for giving devices a rest for 24 hours over a weekend. Entrepreneur Claire Diaz-Ortiz, one of Twitter’s first employees and the author of *Design Your Day*, takes it one step further by closing her computer Friday after work and not opening it again till Monday morning. “Having it shut off means I can’t run in and check email for five minutes on Saturday morning—it requires booting up, which makes it harder to do,” she says.

##### • Manage your email. Don’t let it manage you.

“One of the challenges with email is it makes you accountable to other people’s priorities and what they think is urgent,” notes Diaz-Ortiz. After realizing how much of her life was spent dealing with email—so much so, she says, “that I couldn’t be thinking about what I was doing in the moment, whether at the pediatrician’s or watching *The Bachelor*”—she deleted email capabilities from her phone. She checks it on a laptop twice a day, in the hour before lunch and then before shutting down at the end of the day. People know to text her for anything urgent.

A less drastic route: set up a dedicated email address for family or an assistant or boss, so that those are the only emails that come to a phone. With texting, put the Do Not Disturb function in iPhone settings to use: flick it on, and then choose a few people whose texts can come through.

##### • Swap in something fun.

When we’re trying to get rid of a habit, we have more success if we replace it with a better one, says Cantor. “So don’t just say, ‘I won’t check Facebook tonight,’ ” she urges. “Tell yourself, ‘I’m going to call an old friend and have a long talk.’ ”

##### • Get a digital babysitter.

The popular Freedom app works as a Web, social-media and app blocker. Digital Detach for Android limits everything except calls and

texts for a set period of time. StayFocusd is a Google Chrome extension that helps beat Internet procrastination by blocking websites or limiting usage of them; SelfControl does the same for Macs.

##### • Try phone stacking.

To combat the unfortunate phenomenon of being out with friends or colleagues who are all glued to their mobiles, people are playing a game known as phone stacking, in which everyone places their device in the center of the table, and the first person to go for theirs pays for the meal. Businesswoman and technology blue blood Randi Zuckerberg plays this variation at home with phones: “The person who reaches for it first does the dishes.”

##### • Don’t carry it everywhere.

“Every time your phone buzzes, it creates a buzz of excitement—maybe it’s that friend! Maybe it’s that job offer!—that’s hard to resist,” says Brian Primack, director of the Center for Research on Media, Technology and Health at the University of Pittsburgh. Sure, we could turn off the alerts—but that doesn’t turn off temptation, as Primack discovered when he’d check email every time he went to the office coffee machine. His solution: a phone holder he keeps off his desk. “Now when I go to get coffee,” he says, “I don’t take my phone, and I try to be in the moment.”

##### • Download permission to unplug.

Going offline at work can be anxiety-provoking—we don’t want to appear unavailable to the powers that be, notes Fielding: “Employees tell me that they crave the legitimate right to unplug.” These days, when she takes time offline, she sets an out-of-office reply that reads, “I am unplugged, connecting with the people and world around me, and I’ll get back to you as soon as I’m reconnected.” As she enthusiastically says, “There’s such freedom in that! People who see it tell me, ‘I’m so jealous,’ and I say, ‘You can do it too!’ ”