

FOR A BETTER SECOND HALF

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Disconnect

to



reconnect

Is breaking up with our phones the secret to a happier life? Rosie Fitzmaurice investigates.

Digital detox

Each time I go on holiday, I relish the opportunity to take myself offline. With plenty to explore and often dodgy Wi-Fi, a trip abroad is the perfect excuse to disconnect. An excuse to leave WhatsApp messages unchecked, my email inbox unopened and to take a break from social media and mindless scrolling in favour of an audiobook. I love it. So it inevitably begs the question: why don't I do this more often?

Since smartphones became the centre of our universe, there has been a growing concern about the potentially detrimental effects living in an always-on, online world is having on our collective mental health. Usually, the focus is on younger generations, such as Gen Z, who live and breathe social media and gather most life advice from TikTok. But we know that anyone of any age can get caught up in a spot of scrolling that sees several hours pass in the blink of an eye. The truth is that many midlifers are now just as glued to their handheld devices.

This has given rise to the popularity of the 'digital detox', the trend for taking yourself offline for a few hours or days to focus on the here and the now, and not be so bound to your phone. Digital detox retreats are now hugely popular in the wellness world. Think of cosying up in a cabin somewhere remote, your phone locked away in a box, and only a book and a roaring fire to keep you company. It all sounds dreamy, but do digital detoxes actually work? Does the extreme approach of abstinence have an impact on how we use our phone longer-term for better or worse? And given not everyone can access these idyllic settings, is it even possible to renegotiate our relationship with the tech that's so intrinsically linked with our everyday lives?

Tech tribes

'The pandemic showed us the importance of online platforms to stay connected,' says psychologist Audrey Tang. 'WhatsApp groups with family and friends are a powerful way of keeping in touch with the people who are important to us. Phones keep our brains active, help us keep on top of developments, and support practical things too, such as reminding us to take medication.' The challenge, Audrey says, is to be selective about what you consume. 'Use the tool, but don't let it control you. We need to actively teach ourselves to be more discerning with our online choices.'

A (pre-pandemic) 2020 Harvard study found that while daily social media use can be positive for mental health and wellbeing, 'by compensating for diminishing face-to-face social interactions in people's lives', 'emotional connection to social media' – for example, obsessively checking apps for fear of missing out, does the opposite, suggesting it's how we use social media over how often and for how long.

Life coach Milla Lascelles points out that social media can be a great source of motivation to encourage healthy lifestyle goals, such as getting strong in midlife or giving up alcohol, by offering an extended support network, fostering a sense of community and in turn a sense of accountability. 'Perhaps your children have flown the nest or you're figuring out newly single life, so having social media allows you to connect with all sorts of people, which is what we need in those situations. We want to feel part of a tribe,' she says.

The online menopause community, for example, has opened up the conversation around what was previously shrouded in taboo. Not only does it serve as a means of exchanging information and resources, but it reminds many daily that, if they're struggling, they're not struggling alone. Online grief and divorce support communities can offer similar lifelines to people who might otherwise feel deeply lonely or isolated. ►

Brain drain

On the other hand, we know that mindlessly scrolling on social media and news sites, also known as ‘doomscrolling’, is less beneficial to our wellbeing, and the balance is easily tipped. On a physiological level it activates the pleasure receptors in our brain. ‘When our brains are constantly firing dopamine and giving us that feel-good hit, we want to stay on our phones and keep scrolling,’ explains Holli Rubin, a psychotherapist and head of multi-disciplinary therapies at The Soke mental health clinic. ‘But it can increase anxiety, as it keeps us comparing ourselves to an unrealistic vision. Even if we know what we see has been curated or photoshopped, psychologically, it still hits us in a place that can make us feel bad about ourselves.’

Comparing ourselves and our achievements to others, or the lives we imagine others to be living, is one of the most detrimental effects of social media – and it appears to be a phenomenon not limited by generation, as research from Temple University in Philadelphia, found. ‘In their desire to validate accomplishments, many middle-aged adults may look to their high school peers (i.e. those who roughly had the same starting line) as a point of comparison. As most people present themselves hyper-positively online, social comparisons are unrealistic and may deteriorate self-worth and mental wellbeing,’ the authors wrote.

Too much scrolling can affect how you focus and concentrate on things elsewhere in life, too. ‘It divides your attention, so you’re never fully focused or paying attention to the things that are in front of you,’ says Holli. This is the opposite of being present. ‘We think we’re great at multitasking when actually, we’re just distracted by both things.’ Whether we’re scrolling to avoid dealing with difficult situations, purely through boredom or simply due to habit, our brains need a break, Audrey says. ‘You would never leave a car running 24/7, because the engine would wear out. Yet we do it to ourselves by always being online and answering notifications.’



Mindful media


So is a digital detox the answer? Aside from anecdotal claims, there’s a lack of scientific research to suggest that taking a break from social media makes us happier. Interestingly, a 2021 study led by Oxford University found no evidence to indicate abstaining from social media has a positive effect on mental wellbeing, nor did it lead to more time spent engaging socially offline in real life. In another study published in 2019 by the University of New England, researchers looked at how participants responded to taking a week off Facebook and Instagram, and found that for active users, who would normally engage in social media feeds by posting and commenting, it lowered their mood and reduced their perception of life satisfaction to spend a week without it.

Digital detox

If going cold turkey doesn't appeal – or simply isn't practical for you – there are strategies you can introduce to be more mindful about your relationship with the digital world that might feel more realistic. First, evaluate how you're spending your tech time without judgement. 'Ask yourself: what am I doing online? How much time am I spending online? What am I missing out on when I'm on my phone? Am I engaging with people or passively scrolling?' suggests Holli. 'And if you're doing that, that's OK, but what's a fair amount of time to give yourself to do that? It's like choosing foods, you don't want to only be eating snacks or junk food, but it's OK to have a little.'

Once you've assessed your habits, introduce boundaries for yourself. 'I use an app to limit my social media usage. I can't access Facebook, Instagram or Twitter during my working hours in the morning. I can access it at lunchtime and then it blocks me again in the afternoon,' says Audrey. 'I love it because it's so passive-aggressive – it will tell me I've tried to open Facebook three times today and 500 times this whole week – go and do something more productive!'

Treat it as an exercise in self-awareness, Holli advises. 'If you're feeling bored, notice that and think about how you can fill your time in a more satisfying way, as often we feel guilty if we realise we've just spent an hour scrolling,' she says. 'If you're feeling lonely and are gravitating to your phone, can you meet up with a friend?' Her one hard and fast rule? 'Never go on your phone in the middle of the night. Don't touch it. Because the minute you do, you go down a rabbit hole and it disrupts your sleep so much. Charge your phone outside of your bedroom – research shows that you'll sleep deeper and better knowing that it's not even near you.'

Ultimately, if you suspect you could benefit from resetting your relationship with social media, it's about making tweaks to your routine that feel manageable and sustainable – and this will look different for everyone. 

8 tips for cutting down on scroll time

Milla Lascelles shares her top hacks.

- 1 Disable all notifications.** That way, you choose when you use your social media apps.
- 2 Replace** your scroll-induced dopamine hit with other activities, like breathing apps, puzzles, audiobooks or going for a short walk.
- 3 Reward yourself** with technology. If you enjoy the escapism of a mindless scroll, allocate certain times to do it (not when you need to be productive).
- 4 Use an app blocker**, such as Stay Focused, SelfControl, Freedom or FocusOn, when you're working.
- 5 Download** News Feed Eradicator for Facebook. It's said we spend on average 50 minutes every day scrolling through Facebook. That's a day per month and over 12 days per year that you could be doing something else.
- 6 Keep your phone out** of your bedroom at night, and if you're trying to carry out a task that needs focus, put it in another room or drawer while you're working.
- 7 Push apps** that you feel you waste time on to the last homescreen page on your phone, so they take longer to get to.
- 8 Create** a Sunday free phone zone, where if people need you, they call the house phone.