

Digital detox directives for smartphones (Part II)

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In my previous column, I discussed our obsession with smartphones and the damaging impact that the phones can have on both individuals and society. Infants experience less face-to-face contact, and therefore fewer social facial cues, from caregivers, who in their boredom use their phones for entertainment. Toddlers, savvy at a young age in using technology, may be overstimulated and find it harder to focus.

In the digital era, children of all ages are outdoors less, are more sedentary and are less socially engaged with others. Time on social media may lead to isolation, cyber-bullying, depression, violence and decreased self-esteem. Singles checking out potential dates on Facebook may select or exclude individuals based on inaccurate and irrelevant criteria. With our phones present in every room of the house, all the time, preoccupation with work and other issues that can seem important but may not be, can seriously hinder couple communication and intimacy.

We no longer know what constitutes responsible smartphone use. We have access to information that should make life easier, but it takes us away from being present in the moment and from those we care most about. We get less accomplished at work, have lost a sense of balance, are less happy, more anxious and have little personal time for creative endeavors. People intrude at all hours of the day, blurring boundaries and feeding the expectation that you need to respond immediately.

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The need for digital detoxification is enormous, as our phones pull us away from our family, friends and ourselves. We're increasingly more stressed, worried, distracted and irritable, which impacts on our emotional and physical wellbeing. If you're ready to take back control, here are some suggestions for you and your family.

1. Decide if you have a problem with over-usage of your phone by becoming an educated consumer. There are apps that will show you exactly how often and how long you're on your phone and how you spend that time. If you seriously want to make a change, this can be an important eye opener. With any addic-

tive behavior, you must acknowledge the problem in order to solve it.

2. Excessive cellphone "behavior" is often a reflexive habit. You pick up your phone with minimal awareness. Your goal is to change this, to become more mindful and intentional, keeping you accountable and your actions deliberate, with respect to just how, when and why you are on your phone.

3. If you compulsively or mindlessly

check your phone every few minutes, you'll need to honestly decide what you truly need to check versus what you're choosing to check, as well as how often you need to check. Each check is disruptive, distracting and probably making your day less productive. Because you enjoy it, however, you may talk yourself out of thinking that this is problematic. Set your timer so that you can check initially only every 15 minutes, then move to once an hour and then even less frequently. Remember, the phone steals your time. Keeping to a schedule is important!

4. Take off all apps and notifications that are unimportant and jolt you into

reaching for your phone. Some suggest turning your icons to gray as the vibrant colors draw you to your phone. I suspect that color impacts the pleasure centers of your brain. Black and white is less enticing.

5. Your goal is to be in control of your phone and not feel controlled by it. When it's silently in your handbag or drawer, you won't be nearly as distracted as when it sits on your desk and is a glance or ping away. Phones should always be on silent or set to vibrate when in public, and if one must talk, take it outside. Otherwise, it's rude.

6. Choose periods of time and places where you'll be technology-free – mealtimes, family time, first thing in the morning, just before bedtime and Shabbat are all times when the entire family will benefit from keeping phones out of sight. Consider screen-free zones in your house.

7. Keep your phone out of your bedroom. It's easy to reach for your phone first thing in the morning and last thing at night. Change this. Don't use your phone as your alarm clock, charge your phone overnight in another room, and make morning and bedtime a time to reconnect with your partner instead. The detrimental effect of blue light on your sleep, melatonin secretion, circadian rhythm and your health is well described.

8. Set fixed times during the day when you'll check your email, Twitter and Facebook, responding briefly and only during these times. This enables you to scroll more quickly to delete garbage, shorten your responses and respond less frequently. Let people know that you may not respond immediately.

9. As parents, you have the opportunity to model appropriate screen behavior to your family. If you're constantly on your phone, you set a bad example. Remember, screen time is a privilege and not a right, so while we can't ignore screens, as they're everywhere today, you can set healthy limits. Work with your children to establish rules regarding how much screen time they can have and discuss what's appropriate to do with it. Determine rewards for responsible usage and the consequences of inappropriate use. The more consistent you are, the more successful you will be. Say what you mean and mean what you say and follow through.

10. Make sure that technology isn't your children's only source of entertainment, but that they interact with other kids, spend time outside, have time for non-electronic creative play, exercise and participate in healthy family time. Consider the advantages of playing a board game or exercising as a family.

11. Recognize that family arguments around amount of usage, fights between siblings over who uses what and when, procrastination of chores or homework, binge use of electronics, texting into the night, leaving the television and other electronics on in the background or in an empty room, and ignoring the family for social media are just some of the indicators suggesting a major change is in order to break some very bad habits.

12. Consider parental apps that shut off the computer after a designated time and others that screen the viewing content. As a parent, it is your responsibility to monitor how your children spend their time and with whom. One child who has a program like this told me how it helped her better manage her time.

Remember, in your goal of raising responsible, emotionally and physically healthy children, you hold the key not just for their future success but for yours, as well. ■

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