

SPACE TO SWITCH OFF

Distracted by constant notifications? Scrolling through every spare moment? You don't need a dramatic digital detox – just a practical reset. Amy Bonifas explores the small shifts that can help you reclaim your time

Although my friend is only a few minutes late to dinner, I'm already itching with the urge to reach for my phone. I checked it only moments ago, and there were no new emails, messages or updates, but instead of allowing myself a few quiet moments, I can't help but unlock and scroll. When she arrives, I'm still half-aware of the family WhatsApp group lighting up beside my plate. I know I can catch up later. I know the person in front of me matters more. But the pull is strong.

Sadly, this constant interruption has become normal. Research from the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising suggests we now spend an average of more than three hours and 20 minutes a day on our mobiles – more than we spend watching TV – with social media and messaging accounting for much of it. For young people, the prospect is especially worrying. A recent Finnish study of teenage girls linked daily social media use to lower grades and higher anxiety, while *Countdown's* ►

Susie Dent has warned that children's vocabulary is shrinking as reading loses out to screen time.

But before we go beating ourselves up, this isn't simply a matter of willpower. Our phones are specifically designed to keep us hooked, thanks to personalised algorithms and smart marketing.

THE SCIENCE OF THE SCROLL

'Psychologically, our phones hook into one of the brain's most powerful feel-good chemicals: dopamine,' explains Richard Simon, author of *Unplug: How to Break Up With Your Phone and Reclaim Your Life*. 'It's not necessarily triggered by the act of using your phone; it's the feeling of anticipation that really drives us to check it so regularly.' He calls the smartphone 'the ultimate shortcut machine' with emails, messages, news, shopping and entertainment all in one place. Each carries the promise that something might be waiting.

Then there's our phone's constant ability to distract us. 'Our phones are continually fragmenting our attention with what I call "micro-interruptions",' says Dr Martha Deiros Collado, clinical psychologist and author of *The Smartphone Solution*. 'Tiny moments of "just checking" a notification or app can recalibrate what our brain expects from everyday life.'

Over time, we start to pair boredom, stress or uncertainty with instant digital relief. The reward is quick, in the form of a message, a headline or a 'like', but the cost is cumulative.

This constant disruption and task-switching can damage our ability to focus and connect in person. Richard describes it as a build-up of 'attention residue' that might make it harder to concentrate deeply on work tasks, reading or even a conversation. 'Each time we check our phone, there's a context switch, and it negatively impacts our productivity and ability to be present,' he says.

TAKING BACK THE POWER

Richard decided to turn off his phone for a whole year and write about his experience. 'Suddenly, I had all of this time and focus,' he says. 'It helped me recalibrate the reward pathways in my brain, stop filling every transition moment with phone time and relearn how to be properly present with the people I love.'

While going cold turkey might not be realistic, recognising unhealthy habits and becoming more intentional with your phone use is a life skill that comes with big benefits. 'It's about protecting your presence and time, so you can find more joy away from the screens,' says Martha.

Over time, we start to pair boredom, stress or uncertainty with digital relief

SIX WAYS TO RECALIBRATE WITHOUT GOING OFF-GRID

1. TAKE STOCK

'There isn't a clean number of "what is too much screen time",' says Martha. 'The more helpful thing to consider is what impact it's having on you and your family. If it's interfering with activities you need to do, like sleep, meeting work deadlines or family time; if it's replacing spending time with others face-to-face, or you feel more stressed and anxious after being on your phone, that's useful information.'

You can also check your screen time use and duration via the settings section of your phone. Martha suggests acknowledging these negative patterns with compassion rather than guilt. 'Becoming aware of how much your phone is getting in the way will help you learn how to let it go more.'

2. FIND YOUR PHONE A HOME

'I found it helpful to banish my phone to the "worst" room in the house, like the utility room or the hallway – a place where there's some friction to have to get there,' says Richard. 'This way, when you're in bed thinking you should check the news or you're with family and feel the urge to scroll, you have to physically get up and go to that place.' When it's slightly inconvenient, staying present becomes the easier choice.

3. RECLAIM THINKING TIME

'The introduction of smartphones has made it hard for us to be alone with our own thoughts,' says Richard. 'Ditching my phone meant that I learned to embrace boredom and solitude again, which is surprisingly good for our brains.'

Next time you go for a walk, tuck your phone somewhere harder to reach and allow your mind to wander or simply tune in to your senses – what do you see and hear? 'Some people freak out at the thought, but the payoff is big, especially when you're outside in nature,' he says. 'This is when some of your best ideas might appear, or you can do your clearest thinking.'

4. TAME NOTIFICATIONS

While there's nothing like turning your phone off now and again, switching off app notifications can be very effective. 'You can easily do this via your phone settings,' suggests Martha. 'Try this for a week, with the exception of messages and phone calls. Notice which apps you "miss" and which you never need to hear from. Delete the ones you don't need and only switch the ones you find helpful back on, like the news or weather.' When notifications stop dictating your attention, checking becomes more intentional.

5. PROTECT 'BOOKENDS'

'Make a rule that you don't look at your phone for the first and last 30 minutes of your day,' suggests Martha. Morning scrolling spikes stress before you've even got out of bed, and evening phone time can disrupt sleep. Guarding these bookends helps your nervous system reset – and often feels easier than policing your usage all day. You could always try a physical app blocker such as Padlock if you find this particularly challenging.

6. SWITCH ON GRAYSCALE MODE

Numerous studies have found that using the grayscale phone setting can dramatically reduce our screen time. 'Turns out, social media looks less inviting and engaging when in black and white,' says Martha. 'This isn't going to fix your bad habits, but it might help you disengage from your phone during working hours or in the evenings.'

PHOTOGRAPHS GETTY IMAGES

BEST OF HEALTH

