

MODULE 5

**NURTURING  
DIGITAL  
WELL-BEING**

## PUBLICATION DETAILS PAGE

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# NURTURING DIGITAL WELL-BEING

Today we use digital tools and services for work, study and leisure. We are spending more and more time online and interacting with these technologies. Such regular use over a long period of time can have impacts on our physical and mental health as well as on our social lives.

Digital wellbeing is a relatively new area that focuses on how our physical and psychological health can be affected by the regular use of digital technologies and services – and what we can do to maintain a healthy balance.

In this section, we explore what is currently known of such impacts, and also summarize advice on basic precautions and good practices.

Please note that this section does not cover what is known as ‘digital health’ or e-health, which is a specialized area where digital technologies are used for delivering healthcare services.

# KEY TERMS

**Digital wellness:** A way of life, while using technology, that promotes optimal health and well-being in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live more fully within the human, natural, and digital communities. Ideally, it is the optimum state of health that each individual using digital technology is capable of achieving.

Digital well-being is a term used by health professionals, researchers and device manufacturers to describe the concept that when humans interact with technology, the experience should support mental and/or physical health in a measurable way.

Digital detox refers to a state when a person quits or suspends use of digital equipment and devices to use that time for social interactions and other activities. It enables that person to relieve stress and anxiety arising from intense use of digital devices like smartphones



## PHYSICAL IMPACTS

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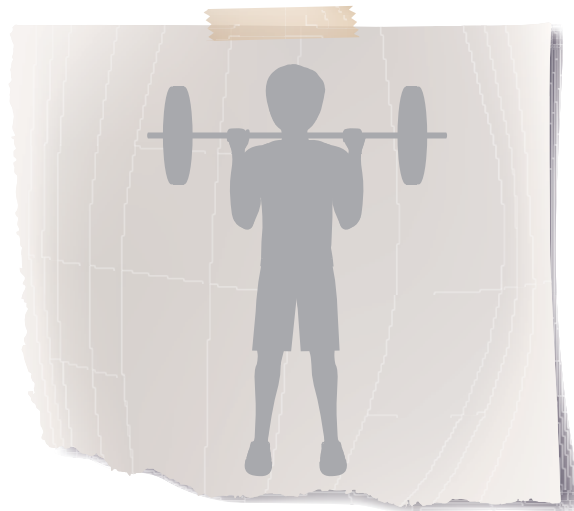
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It is no longer an option to discard the digital tools and services that have become integral to our lives. However, we can better manage the ways in which we use them, to minimize health impacts to our bodies and minds.

Spending several hours of each day looking at a digital screen, especially if the user is seated, can lead to long term health issues. Here are the key impacts on the body as currently known:

- **Eye strain:** Computer Vision Syndrome (CVS) is a complex of eye and vision problems related to the activities which stress the near vision and which are experienced during the use of computers. Symptoms can include eyestrain, blurred vision and dry eyes. (In addition to computer use, other factors can also contribute to eye and vision disorders in an office environment – these include air conditioners, ventilation fans, static build up, airborne paper dust and contaminants.)
- **Neck strain:** When you bend your head down to look at a computer screen, it exerts unnecessary strain on the neck muscles that can lead to muscle pains and even tension headaches. Laptop users have especially poor posture for the neck, as they tend to hunch down to look at screens. Holding a mobile phone between the neck and shoulder (as some people do, to free their hands) also puts the neck in an unhealthy position. Even texting involves a lot of hanging the head over your phone.
- **Too much sitting:** Many who use computers on a daily basis spend hours being seated at their work stations, and such sedentary lifestyle can lead to long-term health impacts including obesity, diabetes, heart attacks, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. Even if such persons take regular exercises, being seated for long can still be a health concern.

- **Hearing problems:** If you wear headphones regularly and for long periods of time for telephone conversations and/or for listening to music, it can lead to hearing problems and tinnitus (ringing in the ears).
- **Disrupted sleeping patterns:** Excessive use of digital devices can lead to poor quality sleep as well as reduced hours of sleep – both of which can have multiple health effects.
- **Repetitive Strain Injury:** The computer has made it possible for users to work all day at a keyboard without varying their pattern of movement significantly. This can lead to Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI), which can involve damage to muscles, tendons and nerves of the neck, shoulder, forearm and hand. These can cause pain, weakness, numbness or impairment of motor control. The three primary risk factors are poor posture, poor technique and overuse.



**“SO, WE SHOULD LOVE OUR TECHNOLOGY, IT’S AMAZING HOW GOOD IT IS. THE PROBLEM WITH TECHNOLOGY IS NOT THAT IT’S BAD, IT’S THAT IT’S SO GOOD. SO WE LOVE IT, BUT MAYBE WE LOVE IT TOO MUCH. WE LOVE IT SO MUCH, WE DON’T ALWAYS REALIZE THE SACRIFICES WE ARE MAKING FOR THE SAKE OF OUR TECHNOLOGY. WE MAKE SACRIFICES IN PHYSICAL MOVEMENT. WE MAKE SACRIFICES IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS. WE MAKE SACRIFICES IN OUR ATTENTION, IN OUR TIME, IN OUR SLEEP, IN OUR CONNECTION TO NATURE. AND WE’RE MAKING ALL OF THESE SACRIFICES TODAY, FOR TECHNOLOGY THAT DIDN’T EXIST 20 YEARS AGO...”**

**JEREMY MCCARTHY, FROM A 2017 TALK AT THE  
GLOBAL WELLNESS INSTITUTE**

## PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS

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Prolonged use of digital tools and services can affect our minds and moods too.

A number of specific conditions have already arisen as a result of the amount of time we are spending on digital devices: gaming addiction, which the World Health Organisation (WHO) recently listed as a mental health condition; the fear and anxiety of being away from mobile phones, officially called 'nomophobia'; and behavioural addictions such as internet and social media addiction.

A 2012 study by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project noted how "Millennials will benefit and suffer due to their hyperconnected lives." Many experts and other stakeholders interviewed for this study generally agreed that those who best capitalize on new technologies will be able to access and sift through large amounts of information quickly. At the same time, ICTs can make users impatient, subject to frequent distraction, and desperate for constant entertainment.

Here are a few ways in which regular use of digital tools can impact our psychological and emotional health.

- **iDisorder:** Medical research is still underway about the long-term effects of digital technologies. Some experts have already cautioned about what they call "iDisorder" -- where users show signs and symptoms of a psychiatric disorder such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), narcissism, or Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which are manifested through the use or overuse of technology. Symptoms include an obsessive need to check for text messages, a desperate desire to constantly update Facebook status, or a near-addiction to smartphone games.
- **Instant gratification:** Rising expectations of instant gratification is another concern. When we post a Facebook status, a tweet or an Instagram photo, it feeds on and reinforces our need for instant approving feedback. Becoming too used to such instant gratification in the virtual world can lead to poor choices and major frustrations in the physical world.



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- **Narcissism:** Social media can help boost some users' self-esteem, but it can also encourage and provide an outlet for a me-centered mentality. It could even lead to narcissistic personality disorder, a mental condition in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration, troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others.
- **Moods disorders:** Research has found that there is a link between social media use and mood disorders like anxiety and depression, but researchers also acknowledge that the relationship is complex. More research is needed before conclusions can be drawn.



<sup>1</sup>Details at: <https://web.eecs.umich.edu/~cscott/rsi.html>

## ACTIONS TO MINIMIZE HEALTH IMPACTS

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As we said earlier, we cannot avoid using digital technologies, but we can take steps to minimize the adverse health impacts from prolonged use.

Here are a few among many practical suggestions offered by health specialists:

- Place your computer in a location with adequate lighting and minimal glare, about 20 to 30 inches (50 cm to 76 cm) away from your eyes. Also, watch out for air sources near your desk that can dry out your eyes.
- Computer users should take measures to reduce glare on their screen. Ergonomic measures which can reduce glare include placing computer screens at a 90 degree angle to windows (they should never be placed directly in front of or behind a window) and to the side, rather than directly below light sources.
- Eye care is particularly important when looking at screens for a long time. Don't forget to blink! We tend to blink less frequently than normal when using a computer.
- Take a 20-20-20 break for the eyes, i.e. staring at something at least 20 feet away for 20 seconds every 20 minutes. As an added bonus, staring into the middle distance can be a much-needed break for a tech-addled mind.
- If you can afford it, invest in ergonomically designed furniture that will give you better posture while seated and working. A better-placed desk chair or better lighting can make a big difference on your physical and emotional well-being.

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- Don't take your smartphone or any other gadget to bed with you, or even keep it close. To avoid disrupting your sleep rhythms, turn off all your screens an hour or two before you go to bed and give your eyes a rest.
- Use a lower back support in your work chair to guide yourself into a healthier posture.
- To avoid constantly looking down, raise your laptop to eye level by placing something under it. You will need to use an external keyboard to type comfortably with your laptop in this position, but the benefits for your neck will be worth it.
- Do some exercises. While you're studying or working, take short breaks to do some simple movements like shoulder rolls. You may be hunching your shoulders up as you work at the computer without even realizing it. In your free time, try some training exercises to strengthen your neck muscles.
- Instead of multi-tasking with multiple forms of technology and media, try to concentrate on one at a time. Try disciplining yourself to devote an uninterrupted twenty minutes to each task, be it answering email or working on a writing assignment or listening to a podcast.
- Begin paying attention to how many forms of media you are using at once and ask yourself what your goal is. Simple awareness can help curb tech binges.
- Set a timer on your computer to go off every fifteen or twenty minutes to remind yourself to get back on task if you have strayed.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewinternet.org/2012/02/29/millennials-will-benefit-and-suffer-due-to-their-hyperconnected-lives/>

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## PREVENTING RSI

The best way to prevent damage performed by repetitive actions is to stop doing the action!

Ensure you are not typing for long periods of time without a break. If you tend to do that without realising it, set a timer to alert you to take a break.

Correct posture is a crucial step to helping prevent RSI. The best is sitting with your back straight and fully supported, monitor at eye level, with your keyboard at around elbow height. If you catch yourself slouching, be sure to correct your posture before continuing.

Other advice includes: using a wrist pad, using a hand exercise during breaks, switching to a trackball mouse, and using an ergonomically designed keyboard.

## HOW TO MANAGE DIGITAL HABITS

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Technology has become so pervasive today that it can be hard to put down our smartphone or turn off our laptop. However, spending too much time with digital devices can be harmful to our health as well as social relationships.

Smartphone is the most widely used digital device in the world today. Most people use smartphones for daily functions like work emails, navigating and staying connected with family and friends. There are, of course, hundreds more apps with various uses.

Not everyone can voluntarily have a digital detox – that is, a period when a person stays away from using any digital or electronic device. A digital detox is done mainly to avoid being addicted or obsessed with digital devices and mentally relaxed by taking some time to enjoy the physical or real world.

Even without a digital detox, it is still possible to monitor and regulate how much we use our devices, especially smartphones. Consider these steps:

- Take regular breaks from screen use. A break can be as small as stepping away from your desk to take a short walk across the room, or as large as observing a ‘technology blackout’ for an entire day each week. Try cutting down on the number of posts or status updates you make each day. Ask yourself whether you are posting for narcissistic reasons, or with the goal of making true connections.
- Both Android and iOS (Apple) devices have recently introduced options to track the total screen time we use each day or week. These settings also allow us to define upper limits of screen time. There are also free apps that allow us to track our digital use patterns.

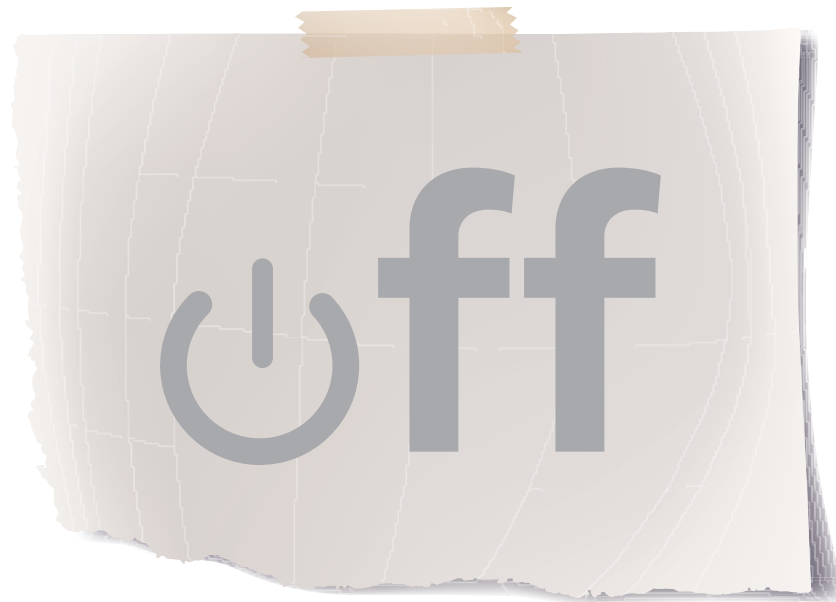
## MODULE 5

- We can also set our own boundaries for smartphone free spaces and times. For instance, try making a pact with yourself to put away phones during meals, family car rides, or an hour each evening.
- The blue light from digital device screens can disturb our sleep. Try not to look at any digital screen at least 30 minutes before going to sleep. Scientists also advise that we should not be looking at a digital screen immediately after we wake up.

Here are seven more good habits recommended by Techlicious website:

- Don't charge smartphones in your bedroom.
- Turn off all notifications — except for those from people. A good rule of thumb is to turn off all notifications except those that enable direct communication with people — in other words, block all apps and games from pushing alerts, including Twitter and Facebook
- Keep your home screen minimal: Remove all icons from your home screen except for the bare minimum of functional apps. This might include your maps, ride-hailing, camera and messaging apps.
- Turn your phone black-and-white (iOS and some Android phones only): colorful icons and app interfaces are tantamount to little rewards for the brain, positively reinforcing the action of checking our phones. They suggest turning your phone display to grayscale to help reduce unnecessary phone-checking.
- Set a schedule for when you read and respond to emails. Depending on how much your work requires you to be in constant contact, restricting when you check email could actually enhance your productivity.

- Use social media just enough: As with email, set times when you can check social media so that when you do, you are intentionally using the app, rather than mindlessly or compulsively scrolling.
- Restrict phone use around people: “Phubbing” is the practice of snubbing others in favor of our mobile phones, which is a bad habit. Studies show that once phubbed, someone is more likely to turn to their own phone, further reducing direct communication. So next time you are talking with someone in person, try keeping your phone out of sight and its notifications turned off



<sup>3</sup> <https://www.techlicious.com/tip/how-to-build-better-digital-habits/>

## CASE STUDIES

### CASE STUDY 1: TIME WELL SPENT MOVEMENT

Tristan Harris was working as a product manager at Google in 2012 and, over time, he became increasingly disillusioned with the demands of digital technologies. He noticed every buzz of his phone was a distraction, and every Inbox notification took him away from his work and affected his concentration.

He soon realized that these were symptoms of the large-scale attention-grabbing business models promoted by his company and other tech companies providing digital services. He created a presentation called “A Call to Minimize Distraction & Respect Users’ Attention”, which went viral within Google, reaching thousands of employees. But nothing much happened.

So in 2016, Harris left Google to start a non-profit entity that was initially called ‘Time Well Spent’ (which has since been rebranded as the Centre for Humane Technology). It is committed to solving to the problems of the “attention economy.” Over two years, he has catalyzed a growing movement of cross-disciplinary leaders in technology, humanity, mindfulness, philosophy, and education.

Using mass media and social media, and through public talks (including TED talks), Harris has drawn attention to the fact that we spend too much time on our phones, and on social media. His solutions are simple: Turn your screen to grayscale (instead of colourful icons of various apps). Switch on the phone’s “do not disturb” mode at night. When if go on a walk or run, leave your phone at home.

Time Well Spent movement’s advocacy is influencing Silicon Valley’s big tech corporations. Beginning in 2018, Apple, Google and Facebook had all added features designed to help users measure their time using those companies’ products and to manage their usage. Ultimately, however, it will be left to each user to be more aware of thier tech use time and to reduce it where possible.



TIME WELL SPENT

DESIGNERS & COMPANIES

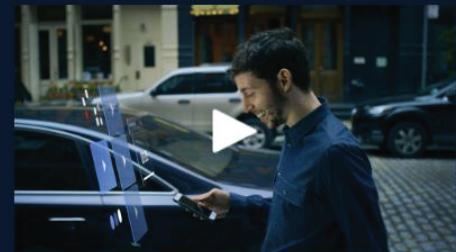
LIVE BETTER

INVENT A HUMAN FUTURE

## Time Well Spent is a movement to align technology with our humanity.

Today apps and media compete in a race to grab our attention. Join a movement to:

- Live better with more empowering settings for our media and devices.
- Change incentives so media competes to improve our lives, not get eyeballs.
- Invent new interfaces that help us to make room for what matters.



Watch The Video

Join the Movement

Read more: <https://humanetech.com/>  
<https://www.wired.com/story/google-and-the-rise-of-digital-wellbeing/>

## DISCUSSION POINTS

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Here are a few questions and discussion points for further exploring this topic.

- If you are a user of a smartphone, tablet or laptop, do you know the way to track how much of screen time you spend on a daily or weekly basis (both Android and Apple phones now allow such tracking)?
- “Being mindful of how technology can distract and derail us helps us reap its benefits without letting the machines take over.” Do you agree with this statement? Discuss.
- Have you checked your posture when seated and using a computer or laptop?
- Are you aware of the strain on your neck when looking down at a mobile phone screen for too long? Discuss what neck exercises and posture corrections are available.
- Visit Google’s Digital Well-being website at <https://wellbeing.google/> and find tools to help you understand and manage your tech use.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

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By the end of this module, you will have an understanding of the following:

- As technology becomes more and more integral to everything we do, it also impacts our bodies and minds, as well as our social life, in different ways. It is important to understand these impacts.
- Technology companies are recognising the impact of their tools and services, and devising ways for us to track - and control - how we use them
- We need not be enslaved by our digital tools. We can be smart about using digital technologies without them controlling our routine and social habits. One option is consciously self-regulating our digital habits.
- There are many simple actions we can take to reduce adverse impacts of prolonged use of mobile phones and computers.
- Most of us have not reached addiction levels in our use of digital tools, but many have a high dependency on them. Understanding the addictive nature of everyday digital technologies is the first step toward ensuring a reasonable balance between using technology without being addicted.

## FURTHER READING

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Digital responsibility website  
<http://www.digitalresponsibility.org/>

Digital well-being website  
<https://digitalwellbeing.org/>

Google Digital well-being website  
<https://wellbeing.google/>

Office ergonomics: Preventing eye strain  
<https://healthengine.com.au/info/office-ergonomics-preventing-eye-strain>

What is Digital Detox and how to start with it?  
<https://mrnoob.net/how-to-start-with-digital-detox/>



