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Health

Is it time for you to take a 'digital detox'?

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Your smartphone vibrates: It's a group text message from a friend about dinner.

After responding, you flip through Instagram. No new photos, but three people liked the selfie you posted half an hour ago. You turn back to the Web browser where your live Twitter feed reveals two new tweets. You "favorite" one and retweet the other before switching back to Gchat, where you're holding three conversations at once, when — ping! Someone tags you in a Facebook post.

You "like" the post before swiping open your phone again to check Instagram, and hey! Another like. And a friend posted a photo of her cat, which you favorite and comment on: #adorbs.

"Never forget you live in an ecosystem designed to disrupt you." So writes Toronto-based journalist Michael Harris in his new book *The End of Absence: Reclaiming What We've Lost in a World of Constant Connection* (Current, \$26.95).

Harris should know: He abruptly quit his job at *Vancouver* magazine when he looked up from a text message, saw 14 windows open on two computer screens and thought to himself, "you don't want this." Harris spent the next few years researching the effect of extended online experience on people's relationships and inner selves, and shares what he found in the book.

"We're now in a world where absence will not come automatically," Harris says in a phone interview from Toronto. He uses the word absence to talk about disengagement from the digital world, and he believes putting away the digital devices is necessary for developing a rich interior life of daydreaming, revering beauty, taking the time to develop friendships and focusing long enough to produce creative work.

Unfortunately, such absence is becoming harder and harder to come by.

People in their mid-30s are the first generation to have more social connections per day with avatars than real people, Harris says. Every month in 2012, Americans spent 520 billion minutes connecting to the Internet on their devices, almost 100 billion more minutes per month than the previous year.

Not only does Harris believe that more and more people are missing out, he also finds the more time people interact on the Internet, the more addicting the Internet becomes.

Why are we like this?

Daniel Levitin, professor of psychology and behavioral neuroscience at McGill University in Montreal, and author of another newly released book, *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload* (Dutton, \$27.95), has a hypothesis for why this happens.

He speculates that human beings evolved as a species to value new information.

Almost every time the brain learns new information, it produces a shot of dopamine that simultaneously activates neurons in the frontal lobe that help you pay attention and neurons in the limbic system that make you feel happy.

This, he says in an interview, was valuable in hunter-gatherer days because it encouraged people to pay attention to new information that could be vital to their survival, say, a predator's whereabouts or a new source of water.

Nowadays, people experience that same dopamine shot for each ping of a new notification on Facebook, retweet on Twitter and like on Instagram, even when this information isn't immediately useful. The pleasure produced by the dopamine quickly becomes addicting and often sucks people into social media binges that gratify them in the moment, but leave them feeling depleted in the long run.

How to cope

That's why Harris and Levitin recommend developing healthy habits when using social media.

At some point every day, Harris leaves his house without his cellphone, taking away the temptation to continuously check it and reassuring himself that he can live life without it. He chooses times that won't inconvenience people, like weekday mornings, rather than Friday nights.

Harris also takes a yearly "digital detox," where he "goes Walden for two days."

"It's not about depriving yourself," Harris says. "If you love online life, you can never know what that world is unless you've left it and come back."

Levitin interviewed scientists, congressmen, CEOs and others he calls highly successful people about how they manage the never-ending flood of information available on the Internet.

He found these people often set up various channels of communication to separate what's urgent from what's not.

For example, some people set up special email accounts they only share with a handful of important people, such as a spouse, boss, parents and kids. Any email coming into that inbox is from someone important. Emails coming into other accounts can wait until later.

If every email went to the same place, you wouldn't know which emails were important until you checked,

says Levitin.

He points out that Google goes so far as to recommend setting up an email account specifically for shopping, so updates on sales at your favorite stores or the status of your latest purchase don't clutter your inbox either.

Levitin himself only interacts on social media for an hour a day: half an hour in the morning and another half-hour in the evening.

But Levitin is also quick to point out that there are pluses, as well as minuses, to social media. It's not a substitute for being with somebody, but it's a way to stay in touch with a larger number of people more efficiently than ever before.

"The comparison to make is with our food diet," Harris says.

Everybody needs sugars and fats, but in an environment where sugars and fats are readily available, one has to actively limit their consumption, and make sure he eats enough fruits, veggies and proteins as well.

In the same way, Harris says "we need social connection, but in superabundance, we need to engineer absences."

'Digital detox' tips

At some point in the day, leave the house without your cellphone.

Stop using all digital devices for several days out of the year.

Limit your social media consumption to half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening.

Create a separate email account just for emails from important people in your life, such as a spouse, parents, kids and boss.

Create a separate email account specifically for shopping, so updates on sales and the status of your latest purchase don't clutter your inbox.

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