



DECEMBER CHALLENGE: SWITCH OFF SCREENS

This challenge is about spending less time staring at a screen and more time with the people who are right there in front of us.

Do you know how much time you spend on your phone or computer or staring at the TV each day? What could you be doing instead?

What are the effects of all this screen-time on our bodies and brains and relationships? Let's use this month to find out.

PART 1: WHY?

SCREENS ARE BAD FOR YOUR EYES

"Extended use of digital devices and exposure to screens can cause digital eye strain," says Dr. Howard Purcell, a Fellow of the American Academy of Optometry. This means blurry vision, headaches, and trouble focusing on one thing, as well as tired eyes. All these screens emit low levels of harmful blue light, which studies suggest can change the way our pupils react to light, causing light sensitivity and strain around and behind the eyes.

SCREENS ARE BAD FOR YOUR NECK

Cell phone-related neck strain is so common, doctors have even given it its own name—text neck. "Research shows that for every inch you drop your head forward, you double the load on those muscles," said Dr. Robert Bolash in an article for Cleveland



Clinic, where he is a pain specialist. "Looking down at your smartphone, with your chin to your chest, can put about 60 pounds of force on your neck."

SCREENS REDUCE OXYGEN LEVELS

According to Cleveland Clinic, sitting in a slumped position hinders your lungs' ability to expand, thus impairing your lung capacity. Inhaling less oxygen means your heart needs to work harder to send more oxygen-carrying blood throughout your body, including to your brain.

SCREENS SCREW UP YOUR SLEEP

Constantly looking at your phone not only keeps your brain up but actually affects and suppresses your melatonin levels. The glare from the phone light, as well as engaging on your phone, keeps the brain active and stops you from winding down.

YOUR HANDS SUFFER

"Using your phone too much results in what doctors call 'overuse injuries'," says Dr. Jennifer Stagg, naturopathic physician and author of *Unzip Your Genes*. Carpal tunnel and wrist sprains in her patients are often a result of cell phone overuse. "Holding the phone for extended periods of time, compresses the carpal tunnel and also causes inflammation of the tendon attachments," she said.

Kimberly Hershenson, LMSW, a New York-based therapist whose practice includes treating individuals with social media and technology addiction, told me that "text thumb" is another common injury seen in patients who spend too much time on their phones. "Pain, discomfort, or numbness in the thumb can occur from overuse due to constant texting and typing," she says.



SCREENS UP YOUR ANXIETY

In addition to negatively affecting our bodies, constantly looking at our phones can impact our mental health, too. "I coined a term called 'acquired anxiety disorder' because of the massive amounts of people I treat in recent years who have major anxiety issues," says Tom Kersting, psychotherapist and author of the book "Disconnected: How to Reconnect Our Digitally Distracted Kids". "This is from spending so much time in the cyber world and not enough time in the real world." As we constantly pump our minds with scary news and content from the self-glorified worlds of our peers, Kersting said, the more insecure we become. "Remember, we are doing this for nine hours per day on average, 365 days a year. Our minds need silence, not a constant bombardment."

SCREENS MAKE US DEPRESSED

In addition to making us anxious and paranoid, constantly checking our phones—especially social media—can end up making us feel sad and excluded. Hershenson thinks that phone addiction can have a negative impact on self-esteem. "It allows us to hide behind screens and present the lives we want others to think we have. We often see pictures about vacations, fun activities, and photoshopped bodies." She explained that this leads to comparisons, making it easy to start thinking, Why are they so happy when I'm struggling? "The truth is, we don't know what is truly going on with people's lives."

SCREENS CAN GIVE YOU ADHD

Being addicted to our cell phones is causing us all to become majorly distracted, too. "Since the average person spends nine hours per day, seven days per week staring into highly stimulating devices, their brains get messed up," Kersting explained. "Countless teenagers, for example, are now being diagnosed with ADHD, even though most of



them don't even have the neurological condition. Instead, because their brains are so used to being stimulated, the brain loses its ability to concentrate, focus, and be organized when it needs to be in certain situations."

OTHERS THINK LESS OF YOU

Meanwhile, [studies reveal](#) that frequent peeks at your device might damage your friendships as much as your eyes. A 2012 University of Essex [study](#) found that the mere presence of a mobile device can make people have a negative impression of us. In the experiment, they paired conversational partners and had them discuss recent events for 10 minutes. Half of the pairs had a cell phone visible but not used, and half had no phone. The people with phones were overwhelmingly seen as less relatable and more negative than people without them.

PHONES CARRY BACTERIA

It's a given that pretty much any object we come into contact with in the course of a day is absolutely seething with bacteria, but cell phones carry extra dangers because we bring them into close proximity with our ears and mouth. A [study](#) conducted by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine determined that one out of every six cell phones in England is contaminated with fecal matter, and 16 percent of them carry the E. Coli bacteria. Washing your hands regularly will help mitigate this issue, but your phone is still a disease vector that can make you sick. If you want to clean your gadget, [here's how to do it](#) safely.

SCREENS MAKE DRIVING EVEN MORE DANGEROUS

Texting and driving is the new public health hazard, and people are worried about it for good reason. A [study](#) from the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute shows that people



using their phones behind the wheel double their chances of being involved in an accident. A staggering 213,000 accidents in 2011 involved cell phone usage. Of course, any kind of distraction is bad when you're driving, but mobile devices are particularly troublesome because they continuously notify you, bringing your attention away from the road time and time again.

SCREENS EVEN MAKE WALKING DANGEROUS

Phones can distract you on the street just as much as behind the wheel. In fact, an increase in pedestrian deaths last year was partially due to distractions caused by smartphones, [according to this report](#) from the US Governors Highway Safety Association. Overseas, authorities are already addressing the issue, from "[mobile phone sidewalks](#)" in China to [in-ground traffic signals](#) in Australia and the [Netherlands](#).

PART 2: HOW CAN I SWITCH OFF?

1. Train yourself to be in control of your phone rather than the other way around.
2. Use an app like [Checky](#) or [Moment](#) to see how often you are on your phone and how much time you spend on it. It will probably shock you.
3. Leave your phone out of sight so you can resist the urge to check it.
4. Turn off notifications. You don't need to know NOW. Schedule times to check technology if you need to.
5. Don't check your phone first thing in the morning or last thing at night.
6. Make a list of what you want to get done during the day and don't check social media until you've accomplished those things.
7. Stop posting to social media.



8. Carry a book with you or, heaven forbid, just talk to people instead of staring at your phone.
9. Don't bring your phone into the bathroom or the bedroom.
10. Do Not Disturb mode is your friend if you still want to be accessible in case of an emergency but don't want to hear about anything else.
11. Never text and drive.

The above ideas are mostly from [this post](#).

[This article](#) convinced me completely about the dangers of screen-time. If the people who created this stuff now avoid it completely, that's enough evidence for me.

Watching *The Social Dilemma* on Netflix also really made it clear just how damaging our technology can be when we aren't careful.

PART 3: WARNING - SIDE EFFECTS

Be aware that with this challenge, you will probably experience symptoms of withdrawal. Dr. David Greenfield, Ph.D. is the founder of [The Center for Internet and Technology Addiction](#), and assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine.

He says your compulsive cell phone behavior is basically created by a Pavlovian conditioning system — when you hear the ding of a text message or new email, you know that there's the possibility of something good happening.



Obviously, you're not rewarded with something good every time. But when it does happen, your brain gives you a hit of dopamine and you experience actual pleasure. You begin to crave that pleasure and then when you don't have your cell phone around, you lose that source of pleasure.

It won't feel good. However, on the plus side, here are [some of the things](#) you may experience if you put the phone away.