

- Social networking

Expert tips on cutting down on social media and the benefits for you

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Two-and-a-half hours – that is the average amount of time people spend on social media each day.



It may not sound like a lot, but that time can really add up – and at what cost? Social media has proven negative effects on mental health (especially for teens), self-image and, for some, is a huge time-waster.

Sure, finding local events, selling stuff on Facebook Marketplace and keeping up with friends from high school are some of the best parts of these apps, but there are definitely ways you can engage with social media that are better for your health.

Anish Agarwal, an emergency doctor, researcher, and deputy director for the Centre for Digital Health at the University of Pennsylvania in the United States, says it's important to constantly re-evaluate the role social media plays in daily life.

The bottom line: taking a break from social media is healthy for you. Read on for guidance and tools to help you limit screen time on these apps.

Re-evaluate what you want out of social media

What is the reason you started using social media? This is the question

Agarwal says to ask yourself when trying to figure out if it's time to take a social media break.

If you're not getting the same satisfaction from using social media for the reasons you used to, it may be time to look for alternatives.

If you joined social media to:

Find community: look for clubs and groups in your neighbourhood where you can meet and interact with others in real life.

Be inspired: consume other forms of media like magazines, books, podcasts, films or live events.

Buy and sell things: try visiting local events and marketplaces in person.

Benefits of taking a social media break

Ever heard of “text neck?” It's the result of looking down at our phones when scrolling or texting, straining the neck muscles over a long period of time. Taking a break from social media helps relieve neck pain and gives your eyes a break from bright screens.

People may be more connected than ever through social media, but a 2018 University of Pennsylvania study found that people who limit their time on social media experience less depression and feelings of loneliness.

Taking a break from social media will give you better sleep, too. Research suggests that nighttime use of social media is driven by fear of missing out, and keeps people scrolling longer at night instead of going to sleep.

Physically distance yourself from your phone and apps

When you're at home and have free time, put your phone in a drawer or somewhere you cannot see it. Often, limiting the ability to quickly and easily pick up your phone is enough to keep you off social media, Agarwal says.

When you're in a queue or have a free five minutes, instead of grabbing your phone, take in the view, practise breathing exercises or read a book.

Use your phone's screen-time tracking feature and limit social media use

Most smartphones nowadays track your screen time and usage. It's a good idea to figure out your average screen time per day so you have a benchmark that you can work on.

On iPhone, you can go into your "Screen Time" settings, which displays the amount of time you spend on each app and allows you to put timers on specific apps to limit how long you're on them.

Android phones have similar features in the "Digital Wellbeing" settings. Additionally, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok offer the same features within the app settings themselves.

Try this helpful exercise to remind you what you're missing by scrolling

Scrolling through social media while you are hanging out with friends is hardly uncommon nowadays, but when you think about how unengaged you are during those moments, it can really put social media use into perspective.

Agarwal suggests that the next time you are in a room with others at a family or friends gathering and you find yourself scrolling through social media instead of engaging with the people who are there, take a minute to physically remove yourself from the room and isolate in another room. Listen and feel how much you may be missing out on.

"What that does is it gives your brain a signal. If you force yourself to leave the room, you realise how much you're using that app and missing out on other people," Agarwal says. "It's a good physical reminder of being present in the moment and not on your phone and scrolling through social media."

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Be easy on yourself and ask for help about social media use

At the least, set small benchmarks for yourself, like spending 10 minutes less on social media than the day before. The right amount of social media time is different for everyone since some people actually use these apps to brand and help market themselves.

Find your own social media sweet spot, and remember: even if you scroll too much on social media one day, you can try and meet your goal tomorrow.