

What impact might a digital detox have on our brains?

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When people talk about digital detoxes, you might begin to dream about a luxurious retreat of yoga classes and unlimited smoothie bowls – but it can also be as simple as switching your phone off for an hour in the evening.



Wellbeing gurus tend to hail this practice as beneficial for reconnecting with the world and improving our mental health.

WHAT IMPACT DOES SCREEN TIME HAVE ON OUR BRAIN CHEMISTRY?

Using phones regularly, particularly scrolling on social media, can increase the levels of dopamine released in the brain.

“When we look at the things people typically consume through screen time, it includes dopaminedriven high reward activities like scrolling, social media and short clips,” says neurological physio and wellbeing coach for Youth Sport Trust, Rachael Mackenzie.

“These activities can gradually alter the way that the dopamine reward system responds to the environment. This can affect our ability to manage impulse and emotion control and regulation.”

Our devices’ efficiency at giving us information so quickly may also affect our cognitive capacities.

“The reliance on our phones means that finding pleasure in tasks that require more concentration, or being a bit more mindful or require attention or focus becomes a little harder,” explains Rachael. “It takes away our need to store and retrieve information for ourselves.”

If you feel tense while doomscrolling, your fight or flight system may have been triggered by the content you are consuming.

“We should experience a fluctuation between that fight and flight, and rest and reflect pattern naturally over a day,” Rachael explains. “But, when we are attached to our screen, we tend to sit in that heightened fight and flight space a little bit more without that reflect and rest phase we are designed to have.

“There are all sorts of physiological consequences to being in that fight and flight state more often than we are designed to be that could have long term consequences on our mental and physical health.”

This could have a bigger impact on children, as their brains are still developing.

“What we do on a daily basis influences the shape of that brain architecture and the plasticity of adolescents and children’s brains is very rapid,” says Rachael.

“Therefore it can be changed much more significantly by a single event or repetition of small impact events.”

COULD A DIGITAL DETOX HELP?

Rachael recommends digital detoxes for her clients and suggests they are a great way to help reset our brains and minds.

“If you have a day or hour where you delete your social media of choice, we move away from that reliance of having to be constantly stimulated and can instead build moments of natural mindfulness into the day,” she explains.

“Time away from screens also gives the added benefit of helping reset and regulate the nervous system so it isn’t in a constant state of fight and flight.”

People may also benefit from engaging in other activities, such as mindfulness or exercise during their digital detox.

“What is important about this disengagement [the detox] is that we are actively looking to engage in tasks which are going to help create more positive habits,” advises Rachael.

Switching off our smartphones might also enhance our productivity at work.

“If we are constantly engaged with our phone, even if we aren’t looking at it and it is present and drawing our attention, then performance across a whole range of cognitive measures is reduced.

“When we remove that distraction, we can improve that focus time it takes to do work and the quality of that work.”