- Mental health

Stress in digital environment: The importance of digital wellbeing

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TECHNOLOGY has become omnipresent and an integral part of our lives.

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck in 2020, this had accelerated and intensified our dependency on technology. The inevitable surge in utilising digital technologies was evident from the incessant surveillance of contact-tracing, to how educational institutions rapidly transitioned to online teaching.

The continuing crisis has changed our lives considerably, imposing the need for various modifications for organisations and individuals to cope in this trying time.

Recent research has shown that adults spend a shocking 11 hours on average a day looking at screens. To illustrate, in the UK, longer work-hours had a notable impact on employees' mental health, causing work stress and burnout.

During the initial stages of the first lockdown in early April 2020, 73 per cent of respondents to an ongoing survey felt that they were coping well with stress related to the pandemic. Five months on, this had dropped to 65 per cent.

After the second lockdown in November 2020 and pandemic fatigue, coping levels continued to decline.

In this increasingly digital environment, reliance on the Internet and the digitisation of work processes have intensified the stress that we experience. The presence of stress in the environment could have a positive impact on the human psyche and physiology. Stress is one of the factors that causes our mind and body to transform into a better version of ourselves as we strive to advance in all aspects of our lives.

This is dubbed as 'manageable stress'. Learning to cope with stress in a healthy way will make you, the people you care about, and those around you become more resilient.

In order to effectively manage stress, it is first helpful to identify the stressors in your life. In this digital age and during this pandemic time, stressors range from:

i) technology being a perpetual distraction; ii) sleep dysregulation, and; iii) the murky boundaries of work and life.

In fact, in 2020, an increasing number of burnouts, mental health was reported among workers and students in Malaysia.

In 2019, an estimated 500,000 or more people in Malaysia suffered from depression. Understandably, digital wellbeing came under the spotlight during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As technology will remain ubiquitous (i.e. spending more time online to connect, communicate, work, shop, inform and entertain ourselves), there are various ways to ensure digital wellbeing.

Firstly, it is crucial to set boundaries in terms of when our working day begins and ends. Try turning off your email notifications and only check your emails at certain times of the day. Decide on the last time you would allow yourself to check your email, and then let everything else wait until morning. This is becoming an increasingly common practice that people are using to manage their wellbeing.

Secondly, is doing a 'digital detox' by finding time to switch off from your devices and disengage from social media. A recent study found restricting smartphone use in the bedroom improved sleep quality and increased happiness and quality of life.

The British Psychology Society recently posted an article on how taking a five-day break from Facebook could reduce cortisol levels (a physiological marker of stress). Other studies have found a similar positive effect on more psychological measures of wellbeing.

Thirdly, use technology to your advantage. Some apps have been specifically designed to help promote better physical and mental health. In terms of countering anxiety and stress, the best apps to look for may be based on mindfulness and self-care.

Our increased digital dependency during the pandemic can benefit our wellbeing rather than be a hazard to it. We need to use our screens positively to promote a sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. This is because 'autonomy', 'relatedness' and 'competence' (Self-determination theory) (Deci& Ryan 2000) form the foundations of 'positive technology' – technology designed to foster human strengths, facilitate human potential and further wellbeing.

The pandemic has magnified many aspects of life. Therefore, monitoring and oversight of the population mental health during crises such as a pandemic are an immediate priority.

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