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Tapping out of 'DIGITAL DEMENTIA'

Could your smartphone or social media feeds be affecting your memory and ability to concentrate? We connect with the experts and find out how to avoid such cognitive decline.

BY LISA BUCKINGHAM

You're on the way to see a friend. You've been to their house plenty of times, but you still tap the address into Google Maps so it can narrate the route to you. While you're there, you try to remember the name of a song that you both love, but it doesn't come to you, so you look up the lyrics online. Later that day, you check Facebook on your phone to see if any important birthdays are coming up that month. Then you hear a ping as your calendar app reminds you that you have a dental appointment tomorrow.

If this sounds familiar, you're not the only one. Our digital devices have well and truly infiltrated every aspect of our lives. According to a 2022 reviews.org survey, Australians check their smartphones every eight minutes on average, while 78.5 per cent say they look at their phones within 10 minutes of waking up.

No doubt, our devices have opened up brilliant new ways to help us remember things, access info quickly and entertain ourselves. But is it coming at a cost to your brain? Some experts believe so.

DIGITAL *WHAT?*

The term 'digital dementia' was first coined by German neuroscientist Manfred Spitzer in 2012. It's the theory that our overuse of the internet and internet-enabled devices causes cognitive impairment, such as reduced attention and decreased memory spans, and may even result in early onset dementia.

Research focuses mainly on the impact on children and adolescents (and what that might mean for their adulthood) because their brains are still developing, but what is the picture for adults who didn't grow up using screens? ►

"The brain needs sensory stimulation to develop and, although the brain is the most malleable during infancy through to adolescence, it continues to change in response to its environment throughout your life," explains Dr Laurie Manwell, a lecturer in behavioural neuroscience. "Sensory stimulation, such as learning a new hands-on skill with verbal instruction, is also important for a healthy adult brain. However, excessive and passive stimulation, such as watching TV or scrolling through social media for hours, can have negative effects, including fatigue, inattention, mood changes and poor physical and mental health."

Dr Larry Rosen, a psychology professor, takes a similar view. "Based on what scientists know about brain changes over our lifespan, it's clear that excessive use of screens will lead to more distraction and perhaps hasten the reduction of myelin [a protective layer around nerve fibres that helps to speed nerve transmissions] in the prefrontal cortex, which then reduces the executive functionality of the brain, including attention, focus and working memory."

THUMBS UP

It's not all bad news, though, when it comes to using smart devices for remembering things. A 2022 UK study brought forth different findings, revealing that digital devices can actually help improve your recollection abilities because storing important information on a device frees up your own memory to recall other things.

According to Dr Sam Gilbert, senior author of the study, it's a natural human trait to use props for your memory. "More than 2000 years ago, [Greek philosopher] Socrates warned that writing things down might make people forgetful," he says. "But a central part of being human is that we use tools to enhance our abilities."

Plus, digital devices can help you maintain social connections – and, says Dr Gilbert, "Maintaining social contact with friends is very good for your health and wellbeing."

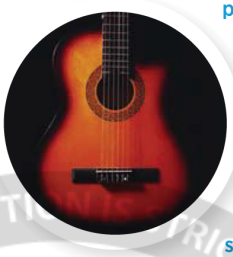
You can also use your devices to play word and number games to stretch your mental muscles, but it's worth being conscious that all apps are ultimately designed to make you use them more. "My work on distraction suggests that any 'healthier' activities on a screen will soon lead a distracted route back to overuse," says Dr Rosen. So, while you don't need to give up your online Sudoku, be aware of where it leads once you're on your device. See right to keep your brain healthy.

5 WAYS TO KEEP YOUR BRAIN ACTIVE

From trying to remember things to playing a musical instrument to really taking in the moment, here are some handy pointers to help keep your brain stimulated, sharp and protected.

1. Test your memory

We've become so used to having information at our fingertips that few of us pause before looking something up. Flex your mental muscles by trying to remember. A recent study found that accessing facts from memory before Googling can enhance your learning and retention when you do look things up. Psychotherapist Giorgio Aprile recommends making things you need to remember into songs. "It's easy to remember melodies, which is why we can sing tunes without looking at the lyrics," Giorgio says. Or create mind pictures. "Associating words or numbers with visuals will make it easier to recall them."



2. Break the habit

Too much time spent scrolling takes you away from more creative, constructive or fulfilling pursuits that have a positive impact on the brain. "Digital devices offer tempting distractions and this can prevent you from focusing on what you really want to do," says Dr Gilbert. Download the free app One Sec, which forces you to pause before opening distracting apps and websites.

3. Immerse yourself in nature

Tackling reduced attention isn't just about cutting screen time. "That isn't enough, unless it's replaced by activities that increase attention span and reduce distraction," explains Dr Rosen. "One easy replacement is to experience nature, which is calming to an overactive brain." Pairing time outdoors with exercise can also help boost cognitive reserve – a 'store' of thinking abilities that may protect you against losses that can occur through ageing and disease.



4. Stimulate your mind

"Learning new skills that require activation and co-ordination of multiple sensory systems, such as dance, musical and visual arts, and many sports, are helpful in supporting cognitive reserve," says Dr Manwell. "Reading about, or listening to, new ideas helps build cognitive reserve, especially when doing so in social groups." Yes, your book club counts!

5. Look before you snap

Recording experiences can affect episodic memory (your recall of events and their context). "Paying attention to sensory stimuli, such as being more aware of what one is seeing, hearing and feeling in the moment, and reflecting on it after, helps encode and preserve that memory in more detail and for longer," says Dr Manwell. So, before you grab your camera, ground yourself in the moment and really engage your senses. P

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