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Put phones away to reconnect

Here are four health benefits of cutting back screen time for the family.

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I CATCH myself constantly nagging my kids and spouse to put down their devices during dinner, in the evenings and on weekends. I feel burnt out by screens by the end of the workday. How can I encourage tech-free time for my family and reduce screen time?



Smartphones, gaming systems and screens are everywhere. They are in our homes, bedrooms, offices, vehicles, pockets and purses.

While these electronics can be helpful and entertaining, the amount of time we spend on them also can become a problem.

Consider this: When using a device, you disengage with something else. Is that something else important to you? Perhaps it's a child, a significant other, exercise, your job, chores or hobbies.

Many people feel like something is missing in life. Perhaps it's an unidentified desire to live life more fully. Reducing screen time frees up more time to connect with family and friends.

Feeling connections with others can help ward off symptoms of stress, depression and anxiety.

We often miss out on the fun and beauty happening around us because of screens. By being present and in the moment – perhaps by setting aside a device – you may find what you need to fill that void.

There are many wellness benefits to cutting down on screen time, including these four:

1. Improve your physical health

You know that physical activity is good for your health, but device use could reduce your exercise time. Maintaining healthy habits can be hard when you spend lots of time using screens. Benefits include:

> Preventing obesity and conditions related to excess weight. This includes conditions include type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Children who watch more TV have a greater risk of becoming over-weight.

> Freeing more time for exercise and play. You can add physical activity to fill the new gaps in your schedule.

> Increasing your amount of sleep. Children who watch more TV tend to have more difficulty falling or staying asleep. They can feel tired and snack more often to make up for lost hours of sleep.

> Reducing mindless snacking which can lead to weight gain. Snacking or eating meals in front of the TV can lead to mindless eating, which can result in consuming larger portions. Eliminating distractions allows you to pay more attention to your body and its signals when you're full.

2. Free up time to have fun playing and exploring

Exploring and learning about the world is an integral part of life.

Children are naturally curious, but adults can explore too. Instead of spending time on devices, you and your family can try new activities. Go for a bike ride, take a walk, visit a park, check out the museum or explore a local nature trail.

Activities that don't involve screens can be as exciting as what is on them. Try colouring, reading, crafting or other activities that use your imagination.

Decreasing screen time allows more time for play and creative activities.

3. Make social connections

Connecting with others is crucial for us to feel cared for.

Children look to their caregivers for this sense of belonging; adults may find it within their families and friends. Devices can damage these relationships.

When parents engage with a screen, children may feel they need to compete for attention. When you set down your device, you are more emotionally available and can help strengthen the family bond.

One study found that children who went without electronic devices for five days were better at recognising facial emotions and reading nonverbal cues than those who lived life as usual.

Less screen time can result in better face-to-face social skills. Having a TV on, even as background noise, will direct your focus to it rather than what is happening around you.

4. Boost your mood

Putting down your phone and going outside or doing an enjoyable activity can be a mood booster. It can make you feel more accomplished and improve your well-being.

Depression and anxiety can cause a person to withdraw and isolate themselves from others. Engaging in social activities helps you connect with others and reduce symptoms of these conditions. Children who spend more time looking at a screen are more likely to have behavioural problems and divided attention; decreasing screen time can improve their focus.

Violence in media may cause kids to feel anxious and depressed and lead them to think that violence is an acceptable way to deal with problems.

While technology is a great tool, it also can hinder your wellness and make you feel disconnected from those around you.

Taking a break from devices frees up more time to be active and enjoy time with loved ones. Why not give it a try? – Mayo Clinic News Network/tribune News Service