

The importance of unplugging in a busy world

Living in a digital world

It's important to acknowledge we are living in a digital age. We are never far away from a device in our personal or work lives. It's predicted that by 2025 the UK population will reach 68.3 million and a staggering 95% of all adults (16+) will be using a smartphone.

Currently, people in the UK spend the most amount of their time on video, social media or communication applications. There are still lots of questions around how technology impacts us and how we can develop healthy habits around its use.



What's the impact?

The answers aren't as clear cut as they might seem. Scientific research in this area is still emerging but there's a growing interest in how technology impacts our cognitive function – thinking patterns, memory, attention, decision making, organisation and emotional regulation. Of particular importance is how smartphone use impacts the developing brain, children have more neuroplasticity than adults. There's also a common perception that smartphones hinder creativity by distracting the brain from downtime. Very little is known about the long-term impacts of smartphone use.

Why is it important to rest?

Rest is important because it gives our body a chance to relax and slow down. When we are low in time and energy it becomes harder to look after ourselves. Human bodies are designed to operate in short stints. If we have prolonged stress it can result in anxiety, depression and eventually burnout. Rest involves us

making a concerted effort to shift away from the 'doing' mode into the 'being' mode. It has a whole host of important mental and physical benefits. It impacts our mood, performance, coping capabilities, sense of pleasure and mastery, creative thinking, concentration, ways of looking at information, reasoning, problem solving, sleep, blood pressure and immune system functioning.

Technology can be a near enemy

Pure rest involves the mind and the body. Can we really be resting our mind if we're using technology? As humans we can easily be distracted by new and exciting information. Technology can provide us with an endless stream of information that captures our interest. Sometimes we may crave escapism. It may be difficult to face day to day realities. Research shows smartphone use before bed reduces sleep quality, this results in lower work performances and engagements and contributes to higher workplace conflicts.

What does it mean to unplug?

Stress is an inherent part of our daily lives. Stress processing involves the amygdala in our brain, which is always assessing our brains and activates our flight/fright/freeze response until we can regulate ourselves again. Unplugging is important to keep our stress levels in check. We can do this by taking part in our hobbies, spending time outdoors and connecting with nature, exercising, staying hydrated, eating well and getting enough good quality sleep.

We need to value rest as much as we value productivity. Taking regular rest breaks is important and needs to be built into your day. If we engage in a mental task that takes between 30 minutes and 2 hours, we need at least 3 to 10 minutes of rest. When you finish a task, give yourself some distance from it and take a short break - perhaps going for a walk, stretching for a few minutes or practising mindfulness/meditation. This will give you time to recover your energy levels.

It's also important to:

- Be curious about your technology use – monitor screen time and set yourself limits
- Develop good sleep hygiene – reduce your exposure to blue light before bed
- Leave mobiles/tablets out of reach when you can so you're less inclined to engage with them during periods of rest
- Make technology work for you – set reminders to take breaks

What to do if you're struggling to unplug and rest

If you notice that you're struggling to unplug you may need to ask for help from your GP or another health professional. Taking therapy, including cognitive behavioural therapy, could help you develop strategies to protect your rest time and truly disconnect.

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