

Unplugged: Digital detoxing can help families and friends reconnect

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Digital Detox Week, an annual event in April, is gaining in popularity.

It's this excessive connectedness that is straining our bodies and brains, says Kim John Payne, author of "Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids."

"Neurologically, we can't sustain being on high alert any more than one-third of our waking life," says Payne. "What's happening as a result of technology is our brains are saying 'you have to be switched on, in top gear, for 10, 11, 12 hours a day,' and basically we become adrenaline and cortisol junkies. Our brains and our bodies are simply not set up to tolerate that."

Jeanna Freeman of Collierville had never heard of the term "digital detox" before her trip to the mountains of western North Carolina in the fall.

She visited Earthshine Mountain Lodge in Lake Toxaway, a vacation resort touted as one of the country's premier destinations for digital-detox back-to-basics family vacations. There, guests are gently encouraged to set aside their

Blackberrys, iPads, iPhones and other electronic devices and enjoy technology-free stays, immersed in nature, outdoor activities and old-fashioned fun in order to unplug and reconnect with family and friends. Rooms do not include TVs. Instead, guests are invited to relax and converse on the porch rocking chairs, or tackle the zip-line canopy tour and high ropes obstacle course.

For Freeman, the experience of unplugging from her cell phone and computer was surprisingly refreshing. "Honestly, it was exhilarating being away from my cellphone and free of it," she says. " I hadn't felt that good and 'connected' in a long time. I didn't realize how much I needed that."

Earthshine general manager Benny Upton sees a trend in the number of families looking to unplug and reconnect.

"There does seem to be a movement in this direction and a desire to get back to basics," he said. "Campfires, making s'mores, sharing stories, getting away from technology, that's what we're all about and what more people seem to be craving and seeking out."

Many Americans first learned the term "digital detox" when musician John Mayer completed a one-week detox in 2010, and encouraged his fans to do the same. Digital Detox Week, an annual event in April, is gaining in popularity. National Day of Unplugging is set for March 23-24 this year.

Michelle Rappaport, psychotherapist and addiction specialist with the Experiential Healing Center in Memphis, sees benefits in the growing digital-detox trend, as she too-often sees the serious effects of being too connected. The resulting toll on physical health is very real and very troubling according to Rappaport.

"We're seeing anxiety disorders, insomnia, a lot more difficulty sleeping and panic," she said, "and people not knowing how to relax or settle down or go to sleep because there's just so much overstimulation on a day-to-day basis."

"That constant being plugged-in, and waiting for the next message, the next Facebook post, or waiting for someone to reply," she explains, "is starting to affect people." She notes, however, that the problem lies not with the technology and devices themselves, but rather in how we use them. We simply overdo it.

An AOL study in 2010 on e-mail usage found that 47 percent of respondents believe they are hooked on e-mail, 59 percent check e-mail in the bathroom and 60 percent check e-mail on vacation.

And, the latest research by the Kaiser Family Foundation shows the average child in the United States between the ages of 8 and 18 now watches more than 7 1/2 hours of entertainment media per day.

"It's shocking to a lot of people," says Payne, "but when they stop and think about it, they say 'well, yes, that makes sense.' That is tremendously out of whack."



He teaches that families should spend a minimum of two to three hours each day being fully unplugged.

"Our kids crave our attention. They thrive on it," he explains. "We desperately need moments to unplug so that we can be fully present for our children. They need to decompress."

Indeed, some believe unplugging may not only be good for the soul, but also good for the bottom line in business. Many companies are recognizing that too much technology results in loss of creativity in employees. Some companies, including Google, are insisting that their workers unplug for certain parts of the day, recognizing that in order to innovate, employees need time to unplug.

"Back in our early start-up days, we found that great things happen more frequently within the right culture and environment," Katelin Todhunter-Gerberg, a Google spokeswoman said. "That's why we offer Googlers a generous host of benefits today to help them unplug and unwind."

Google employees are offered use of bikes and walking trails for informal meetings, onsite fitness classes, and onsite massage therapists to ensure they are comfortable and refreshed.

The movement to unplug and detox from technology may be taking root.

"People are much more discerning and conscious about their use of technology now," says speaker and author Payne. "It's like we got all caught up in technology, about how amazing it was, how wonderful it was, but now a lot of people want to control the technology rather than the technology controlling them."

TIPS FOR DIGITAL DETOXING

Here are some tips from experts on digital detoxing to help your family unplug.

Don't go cold turkey. Cold turkey almost always fails. Ease off the technology gradually. Limit yourself to checking e-mail three times a day, instead of every 10 minutes. Check Facebook once in the morning and once in the evening, not every hour. Small steps equate to progress.

Set new ground rules at the family dinner table. Turn off the TV. Silence all phones and cellphones. Shut off all laptops and devices. Focus only on one another and spending quality time.

Consider digital detoxing from your smartphone with these free apps: Digital Detox for Android smartphones disables your phone for a period you specify. Sabbath Manifesto for Androids, iPhones, Blackberrys and other smartphones does the same (sabbathmanifesto.org/unplug).

Lead by example. Don't bark at your kids to shut off the TV while you can't pull yourself away from updating your Facebook page. When you tell your kids to unplug, show them how it's done.

Get real. Go have coffee with a friend. Take a walk. Enjoy a picnic lunch. Write a letter to someone you haven't spoken with in a while. Buy fresh flowers. Open the drapes and enjoy the sun.

As you grow more comfortable with being unplugged, designate larger time frames for going technology-free. Decide how long you want to unplug -- perhaps over a weekend -- and do it. Remember to notify friends you're unplugging.

Make a regular habit of digital detoxing -- daily, weekly and on family vacations. Your kids and spouse will thank you.