



Mindfulness and Technology

First it was radio, then it was television and now the warnings are here about the negative consequences of too much time spent on smartphones and all the other digital devices to which we've grown so attached. In most workplaces and homes today smartphones and other digital devices are considered an appendage. Statistics suggest that on average people spend 1.7 hours a day social networking, and check their phones some 46 times a day. There can sometimes be so much incoming information —emails, instant messages, social-media notifications—that people struggle to recall which medium the information came on; Facebook, twitter, whatsapp etc.

Obviously though technology is here to stay. It makes life easier, more fun and more social—but is it affecting our wellbeing and should there be self imposed limits?

According to Dr. Paul Atchley, a cognitive psychologist at Kansas University “We’re inherently social organisms, and there is almost nothing more compelling than social information which activates part of your brain’s reward system”. Unfortunately, our brain is also wired to pay attention to, and get excited about novel sights and sounds such as a buzz, beep or flashing light. So not only does our brain like new social information, it also is designed to pull our focus away from other tasks, such as writing that board report, to attend to the *buzz, ding* and *ping* from our phone.

And while you may think you can quickly check a text or email and pick up that task where you left off, you really can’t. “Every time you switch your focus from one thing to another, there’s something called a switch-cost,” says Dr. Earl Miller, a professor of neuroscience at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “Your brain stumbles a bit, and it requires time to get back to where it was before it was distracted.” One recent study found it can take your brain 15 to 25 minutes to get back to where it was after stopping to check an email. So for those that feel that they absolutely cannot disconnect at work, consider that technology can make us less effective workers. You’re not able to think as deeply on something when you’re being distracted every few minutes, and thinking deeply is where real insights come from.

“Do we want to live an ‘i’ life or a real life? How many of us sit on the couch at night, start scrolling through Facebook updates, and suddenly it’s two hours later; where does the Internet time go? When we’re overly immersed in social media and Googleland, we’re missing out on real conversations, thinking deeply and creatively, being present in the moment and engaging in meaningful activities. In addition, your productivity at work will be much better quality and quantity if you’re not always switching between email and your work.

The result is that disconnecting has become a mental-health must do and ironically there are a number of apps that help us to digitally detox and to create a mechanism by which we can ‘disconnect to reconnect’ with real life as opposed to an ‘i’ life.

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One such app for Android and Apple devices is called [Forest](#), which is a great example of a ‘digital babysitter’ that attempts to change your tech habits and give you more mindfulness and less screentime. But what is the Forest App exactly? At one level, it’s a smartphone game. But unlike others, Forest is a game you play by successfully staying off of your phone. And at another level it’s a tool for timing and measuring your ability to stay off your phone for focused blocks of time.

The app is called Forest because the game is to plant a virtual tree, that takes, for example, ten minutes to grow, and as long as you can stay off your phone long enough, the tree will finish growing and be added to your on-screen forest for today, but if you get back on your phone too fast, the tree withers and dies. BEFORE you unplug, the app has a start screen with a button that will plant your tree, and that will start a timer, which you can set for anything from ten minutes to two hours. Once you plant the tree, the app moves to push you away from your phone. While the work timer counts down and the tree grows on-screen, the app also flashes messages to you on-screen, like “go back to your work!” And in the paid version of the app, you can take personal control of your behavior change by writing customised motivational messages to yourself.

If you stay off your phone then the app tells you that your tree has finished growing. If you jump back on the phone too early your tree dies a tragic early death. Either way, the app will give you credit for the amount of time you stayed focused, and add the living or dead tree to your on-screen forest for the day. You can tag your focused time blocks with what you were doing, and you can then see graphs day-by-day of what you were focused on and for how long. You also get points for how long you focused, which you can use to unlock audio tracks or more fun kinds of trees to plant.

The app also allows you to set a timer between 1 and 60 minutes to take a break from focusing, which will let you do anything on your phone and then will buzz when the break is done. This feature of the app is a great approach for those of us that struggle with effective time management.

The app helps make the abstract idea of focusing away from your phone into a fun game.



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