



Ping! That's real life calling

Ready to unhook your wired brain? Well, your smart device can help make that happen

We often bemoan the negative effects on our health and wellness caused by our collective addiction to our smart devices.

It's seeing a queue of people waiting in a line with fingers glued to their touch screens. It's the guilt you experience when you hand an iPad to a child or grandchild to get them to sit still. It's watching a couple in a restaurant engaged in conversation; not with each other, but with their smartphones. And it's the day in the park when no one is enjoying the sunshine or watching their children play because they are looking down at their phones.

Ironically, when it comes to breaking this addictive behaviour, the place to start is with your smart device.

Don't delete your account (but maybe delete that app)

This may sound like heresy, but hear me out. Do you feel phantom vibrations from your phone? Do you feel them even when the device is not in your purse or pocket? You may want to try this seemingly drastic step. If you want to quit smoking, you start by throwing out your cigarettes. If you want to quit checking your phone, you can delete the social app from which you get your fix.

At the beginning of the year, I deleted the Facebook app from my iPhone. The benefits



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were almost instantaneous. First, I stopped looking at my phone so much. I would unlock it, realize there was no app, and then put it back in my pocket.

I found I was less anxious about keeping up-to-date with what friends and colleagues were doing. Instead, I focused on what was happening around me.

An unexpected bonus in all of this is that I have found my phone's battery lasts longer due to it being used less. So the anxiety caused by seeing my phone's battery life below 50 per cent has basically been removed.

Managing device usage by children

Before we get started, the answer is yes. Yes, you can just take the iPad away from your child when it is past their bedtime. There is an opportunity here to teach self-control and time management – skills he or she can leverage for homework, activities and chores.

In our home, we've set a limit on the number of screen hours allowed for each

child and we use tools to avoid accidental viewing of inappropriate content. Since we use a mix of devices, a variety of these tools are necessary.

The keystone to our system is a product I've mentioned before called KidsWifi (kidswifi.com, \$129). KidsWifi is a small WiFi router that creates a second wireless network on top of your existing network. The KidsWifi software automatically filters out most adult content. You can also block out specific websites or social networks.

Scheduling device time is where KidsWifi really comes in handy. On weekdays, our KidsWifi network is only active between 5 and 8 p.m. Weekends are for failed attempts to sleep in, so I have the KidsWifi network scheduled to be active from 7 a.m. through 8 p.m.

This setup covers general usage. But then there's my eight-year-old who is addicted to coding. I've created an additional user account for her to manage her coding usage on our home Apple laptop and you can also do this on Windows PCs.

Her account is configured to only give access to the browser and a painting application. The content filtering is taken care of by the KidsWifi device. I've also set up her account to only allow two hours of usage per day.

There are two other content filtering and scheduling tools to take a look at. Kindera (kindera.com, \$199) offers similar features as KidsWifi, and also includes filtering for each device and each user. It's a great component for households with children of different ages.

Kidslox (kidslox.com, free to \$29.99) is a software-only option for iOS and Android devices. It features the same scheduling and filtering tools as KidsWifi and Kindera. The only drawback is that you have to pay per device that the software is installed on.

Mental Health

We all feel anxious, nervous or depressed sometimes. Recognizing the cause of your anxiety is a great first step to dealing with it. Your smartphone can often be the source of what's making you anxious. It can also be a great tool to reduce anxiety, clear your mind of unwanted thoughts and bring focus to things for which you are grateful.

One of the best places to start is meditation. Headspace (headspace.com) is a meditation-training app for iOS and

Android devices. While it is a paid service, Headspace does offer a free introductory course called Take 10.

You spend 10 minutes a day for 10 days on a course designed to teach you the basics of meditation. After that, the service is subscription-based and will cost you \$12.95 per month for access to hundreds of hours of online content.

Stop, Breathe and Think (stopbreathethink.com) is another meditation program that gets you to do just as the name suggests. This program is interactive and asks you to start by, well, stopping. You are prompted to take a moment to clear your mind and then you are asked about your mental, physical and emotional states.

Answer a few brief questions and Stop, Breathe and Think suggests meditation exercises to help bring a sense of balance back to your day. I use the service in the evenings to help clear my mind before heading to bed. Stop, Breathe and Think is available for iOS, Android and the Wii and it is also available as a chatbot on the

popular work chat system Slack.

Local entrepreneurs Jim and Jennifer Moss have been working with companies around the globe to help make workplaces happier and healthier with Plasticity. Earlier this year, Plasticity launched a free version of their platform for individuals.

Plasticity is built based on the science of neuroplasticity – the human brain's ability to reorganize itself through life. The benefits of Plasticity are found by completing daily questionnaires and short training activities.

In the same way a runner starts training for longer and longer races, you can use Plasticity to train your mind to build a happier and healthier mindset. You can sign up for a free account at www.plasticitylabs.com/product/personal.

Remember, life is to be lived – and to do that, you've got to put the phone down every once in awhile.

Alex Kinsella has been part of Waterloo Region's tech community since 2004 and is always looking for the next great gadget (or tacos, if it's Tuesday). Find him on Twitter at @alexkinsella

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