THE GOAL: TO HAVE A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR TECH.

DIGITAL WELLNESS

The latest in self-care is all about taking control of your tech usage.

BY ASHLEY MATEO

TODAY, I'VE SPENT 2 hours and 51 minutes scrolling through Instagram, Twitter, and other apps—and it's not even dinnertime. I'm not alone. Comscore's 2017 U.S. Cross-Platform Future in Focus report revealed that to be the exact amount of time the average American spends staring at his or her phone each day. Even scarier: When you add in other types of devices, that time goes all the way up to an average of 10.5 hours a day, according to the 2018 Quarter 3 Nielsen Total Audience Report. Wow is right.

Of course, you probably didn't need to know average usage numbers to know that we all rely on technology for pretty much everything—navigating our way to new spots, connecting with loved ones, and even finding answers to questions we never knew we'd ask.

"Our devices are bringing us capabilities we've never had before," says BJ Fogg, PhD, founder and director of the Stanford Behavior Design Lab and author of *Persuasive Technology*. "It's like a superpower." Plus, many apps, digital games, and social media make us feel successful. "Some of this technology is designed to make you seem like you're getting better at something or progressing," Fogg explains.

And with a feel-good one-two punch like that, why would we ever want to put our phones down? Experts say it can have IRL effects on your relationships, your brain, and even your body.

Giving up our devices entirely, though? Yeah, that's impractical and unrealistic. And that's where digital wellness—a term that's been popping up at tech conferences, including Apple's Worldwide Developers Conference in 2018—comes in. What sounds like a tech-industry catchphrase is actually pretty simple. "Digital wellness is about limiting the use of technologies that create anxiety, stress, and mood changes," says John Torous, MD, a psychiatrist and director of the digital psychiatry division at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. "And, instead, focusing on the psychologically beneficial uses of these technologies to connect with the right people and to have meaningful experiences."

The Damage, Explained

The irony of being connected 24/7 is that it's actually making us less connected—to those who are important to us and to our own minds and bodies. "The connection digital technology provides is more superficial, and it interferes with deeper, more meaningful connections," explains Jeremy McCarthy, chair of the Global Wellness Institute's Digital Wellness Initiative. And research supports this. According to a study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, young adults who spent more time on social media actually felt more socially isolated.

It's not just the blatant rudeness of texting while someone is talking to you or the casual inattention of scrolling your newsfeeds while watching TV with your partner. Just having your phone in sight can stifle closeness, trust, and empathy, a study in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* found. "It puts this buzz in your head: 'What am I missing out on?'" says Larry Rosen, PhD, a research psychologist and coauthor of *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World*. "It starts to make you feel like what you're doing in person with someone is making you miss out on other important things." Hello, FOMO.

That fear and anxiety of being away from mobile phones even has a name—nomophobia—and some experts are calling for the issue to be added to the bible of psychiatry, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. "With the increased use in social media, there's also been an increase in generalized anxiety and separation anxiety," says Rosen.

There are physical effects, too. "We're moving our bodies less because we're spending more time on technology and locking ourselves into anatomically unnatural positions where we're just staring at a screen a few feet from our face," says McCarthy. That's led to an uptick in issues like digital eye strain and "tech neck," or aches in your neck and shoulders from hunching over a phone and computer all day.

Get Your Usage Under Control

In an interesting twist, the very technology that is causing these problems is now trying to help you adopt a healthier relationship with it. Apple's iOS 12 update included new digital-wellness features that allow users to monitor how much time they spend on devices, set time limits on app usage, and control the distraction of notifications. Google announced similar new Android features, like "Flip to Shhh," which switches your phone into Do Not Disturb when you place it facedown, and a "Wind Down" mode that turns your screen to grayscale at your designated bedtime.

"Use these features to gather info and get a sense of your typical behavior," advises Rosen. See what apps you spend the most time on; then decide if you need or want to be using them so much. Your maps app may be a necessity, but is spending hours a day on social media adding to your life? Once you establish a goal of what you'd like to cut back on, find ways to help yourself achieve it. That might mean using the time-limit features to block distracting apps or going so far as to program your Wi-Fi router to turn off at 8 p.m.

Another idea: Hold yourself accountable—with a human. "It's like having a gym buddy," says Dr. Torous. "There's something very powerful in telling a friend or family member what your goals are." It creates a social contract, something that is often stronger than your own willpower.

Finally, keep in mind that what works for someone else may not work for you. Like with healthy eating or working out regularly, the only way to create lasting change is to do it on your own terms. ⊗

> "With the increased use in social media, there's also been an increase in generalized anxiety."

Studio Firma/Stocksy

THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT
Yes, you really can use technology to help you unplug.

①
FOREST
Open the app, set a time, and put down your phone. The app "plants" a tree that grows until you pick up your phone (if you use your phone early, it dies). You earn coins for the trees you grow—and can use them to have trees planted IRL! (forestapp.cc)

②
MOMENT
Not only does this app track your phone usage but it also provides "boot camp" challenges— like "stop sleeping with your phone" and "simplify your homescreen"—to help you develop healthier habits. (inthemoment.io)

③
FLIPD
Engage "Full Lock" mode, and your smartphone turns into a dumb phone, with all your downloaded apps hidden until the set time is up. (www.flipdapp.co)

④
MUTE
Wish someone would applaud you for the time you do manage to stay off your phone? Mute sends you motivational messages when you manage to go without picking up your device for a certain amount of time. (justmuteit.com)