

Digital Depression

by Jeanne Faulkner, Contributor

A while back, after a long week hitting the keyboard surfing the Internet and keeping up with social media (it is my job, after all), I developed some unsettling symptoms: mild anxiety, malaise and irritability. It wasn't serious, and after a weekend off I was fine. Then it started happening after watching the news and wasting time on Facebook. Was it the deadlines or headlines, politics or the economy? Was it that my Facebook life wasn't thrilling enough? Was it the Mayan calendar and that end-of-the-world thing? Just before sinking into despair and bringing my spouse along for the pity party, my dearly beloved shouted, "Snap out of it!" That was the "Moonstruck" moment I needed.

With millions of us making our living on the computer and spending our recreational hours online and glued to Netflix, cable news and reality TV, society is facing new mental health challenges. Experts are noticing emerging (if still unofficial and unnamed) syndromes like Facebook addiction, internet isolation, and telecommuter edginess. OK, I'm making up those names, but I think all that screen time is messing with our heads. In all seriousness, researchers in England seriously explore the theory between link between internet addiction and clinical depression in young people. Scientists at the University of Pittsburgh and at Harvard Medical School found a correlation between TV viewing and depression. (<http://archpsyc.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=210196>)

Does that mean screen-time causes mental health problems? Not necessarily. And scientists point out that, conversely, it might be mental health issues that cause people to hole-up with their screens instead reaching out to people in a reality-based setting. These studies do warrant consideration, however. Even if it doesn't make you clinically depressed, excess screen time could make you unhappy. That's because computers and televisions make lousy office mates and crummy life partners.

And it doesn't mean you have to upload drugs to succeed in the digital world. It means you might need to tweak your online habits and give your offline life more attention. You know, actual as opposed to virtual life?

Give these tips a try:

- 1. Get Offline:** Quit messing around on entertainment and gossip sites, shut down the food-porn and, for God's sake, log off Facebook. Social media and internet surfing are major time suckers that keep you glued to your computer (or other electronic device) for hours. The sooner you buckle down, the sooner you can leave your office and live your real life. If you don't have the self-control to stay offline, unplug your modem, move your laptop somewhere without wi-fi or download software like SelfControl, which temporarily blocks whatever websites you feel could be a problem for you.
- 2. Get Real, Only Better:** You know those status updates your "friends" post that make you feel like a loser? "Friends" don't usually post stuff like: "My sink's clogged" or "I haven't talked to another human in three days." No, they're posting their shiny, sparkly life highlights. You too can post like an overexcited adolescent: "I just took the best shower ever!" "OMG, this oatmeal rocks!" Go ahead ... add the fireworks to your status updates, then focus on adding it to your real life.
- 3. Get Up:** Set a timer to go off every hour while you're working. Hit save and stand up. Walk outside, get a glass of water, stretch, feed the cat and do something real for a few minutes.
- 4. Get Physical:** Exercise should be among the biggest priorities of your day. Sedentary work takes years off your life by reducing cardiopulmonary fitness, health, wellbeing and mental acuity, increasing your pants size and decreasing your social life. Get moving. Get your heart pumping. Get sweaty, and keep your fat pants in the back of your closet.
- 5. Get Social:** Nothing beats anxiety and depression like human interaction, person-to-person communication and companionship. And no, e-chatting and Match.com don't count. I'm talking dinner with family, concerts with buddies, walks in the rain, whatever ... just get with your people--real people, not avatars.
- 6. Open Wide and Say "Ohm":** We cram our brains with online nonsense, like dogs dressed in costumes and cats on treadmills (OK, that one's hilarious), but what goes in must come out or your brain clogs up. Regular meditation clears out the noise, creates mental/spiritual space and makes daily activities go more smoothly. Consider it clutter-busting for the mind.
- 7. Do Something Different:** Most of us follow the same daily routines, click on the same links, process the same forms ...

shampoo, rinse, and repeat. That right there is a recipe for getting in a rut. Do something new or different every day, even if it's just accomplishing the same tasks in a different order. Your brain loves new experiences and challenges, and this should pay off in a fresh mental outlook.

8. Nourish Yourself: If you are what you eat, then there's no mystery that the reason you're as energetic as a donut is because ... you're eating donuts. There's no app for that. This time you just need plain old-fashioned self-control. Eat well and you're guaranteed to have more energy and a healthier attitude than when your veins are coursing with grease and sprinkles. And make the act of eating something you do at the table, not in front of the screen.

9. Turn Off: When your workday is finished; don't switch from one screen to another. Instead, pick up a book, play cards, garden, dance, and play with your kids. Give your brain a break from the digital duties of the day, and activate your grey matter with real life activities. Make your kids turn off and tune out, too.

10. Reach Out: Take the initiative, make the invitation, volunteer to help, throw the dinner party, or get involved in the community. Don't wait for someone else to make the call. Start making connections today to hook up with a happier, more fulfilling life.

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