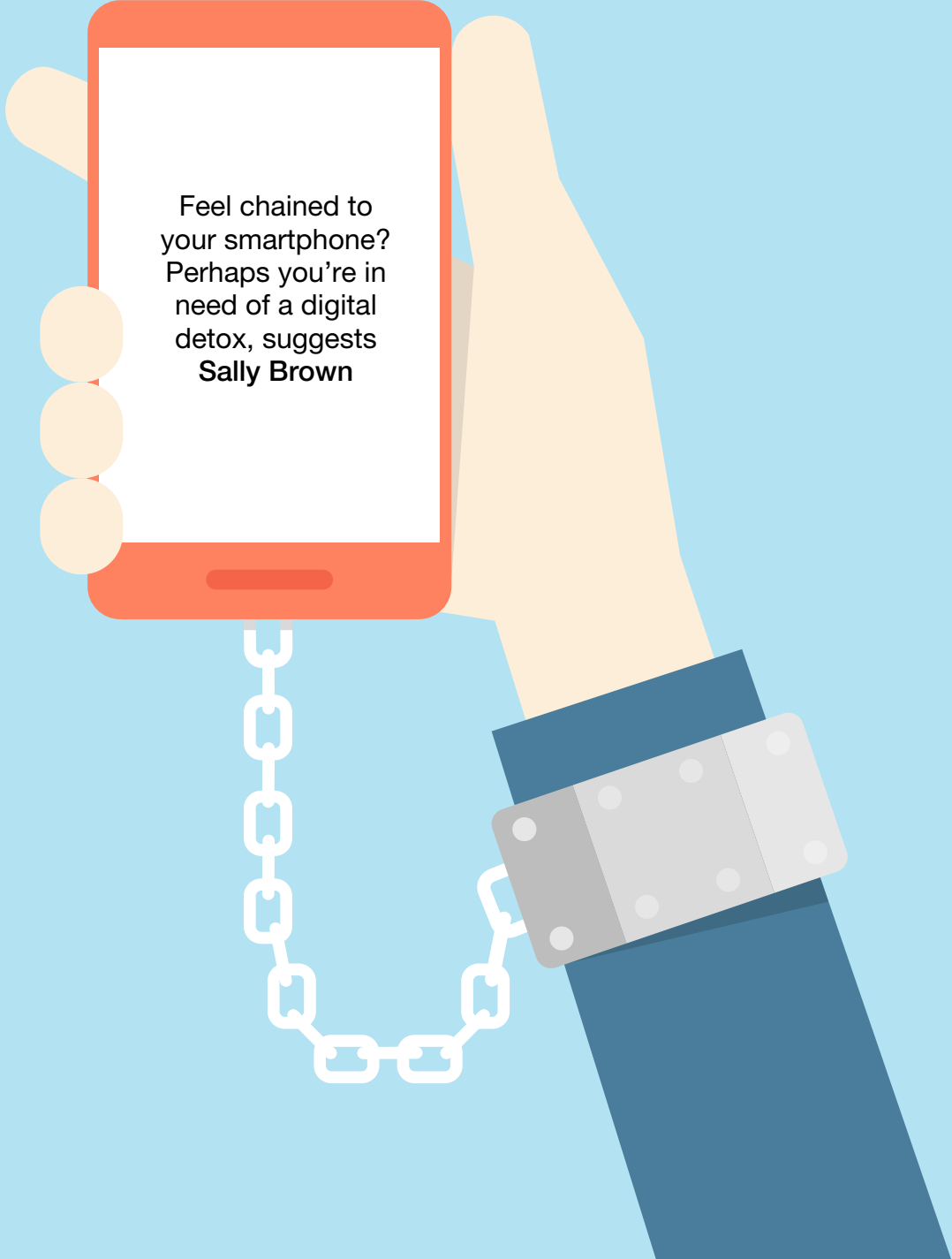


Switch off



Feel chained to
your smartphone?
Perhaps you're in
need of a digital
detox, suggests
Sally Brown

How comfortable did you feel the last time you couldn't check your emails for any length of time?

According to a recent One Poll survey sponsored by App River, 54 per cent of respondents said they felt anxious about losing mobile signal, running out of battery or misplacing their smartphone.

The fear of being without your handset is now so common it's been given a name – "nomophobia". On average, we check our smartphones 150 times a day, about once every six minutes, according to data from Nokia. The research also found that we make, receive or avoid 22 phone calls each day and send or receive 22 text messages – figures that may seem like conservative estimates to the average business traveller, who uses their phone as a virtual office.

The technological explosion of the past three decades has been the "central miracle of our age", says digital culture commentator Tom Chatfield, author of *How to Thrive in the Digital Age: The School of Life*. It allows us to "research and reference much of humanity's gathered knowledge – and gossip and opinion – in a matter of minutes; we are mere moments away from contact with thousands of others. We have godlike capabilities, and are increasingly adept at using them."

But there's a price to pay for our new powers. Although an estimated 2.5 per cent of the global population are "super-taskers", meaning they can concentrate on more than one thing at a time, research has shown that the human brain is not designed to multi-task. If you're emailing, texting or internet browsing while filling in your Excel spreadsheet, what you're actually doing is "switch tasking" – performing each task less efficiently than you would if you did them one at a time. What's more, much of your mental concentration goes on the switch – it may only take a second to read an email that just pinged into your inbox, but it will take several minutes to regain the level of concentration you had before.

The end result is operating in what's been called "continuous partial attention" mode. According to technology commentator and former Apple and Microsoft executive Linda Stone (lindastone.net), it's similar to operating in crisis management mode. "Like so many things, in small doses, continuous partial attention can be a very functional behaviour," she says. "However, in large doses,

it contributes to a stressful lifestyle, and a compromised ability to reflect, make decisions and think creatively."

Stone has also identified a phenomenon called email or screen apnea – the temporary cessation of breath or shallow breathing while sitting in front of a screen. "To find out how widespread screen apnea was, I observed more than 200 people using computers and smartphones in offices, homes and cafés," she says. Stone also tracked the heart and pulse rates of dozens of people while they texted and emailed. "The vast majority were holding their breath, or breathing very shallowly, especially when responding to email," she says. Breath-holding increases stress levels as it triggers the sympathetic nervous system, putting the stress response on red alert.

There's also an ongoing debate about what operating in continuous partial attention mode is doing to our brains. According to a US study published last year, most can concentrate on a task for only six minutes before switching to a technological distraction.

One in three people in the UK report feeling overwhelmed by new technology

Although experts such as neuroscientist Susan Greenfield believe we are raising a generation with impaired concentration levels, and some talk of a "digital dementia" timebomb ticking, there is no proof yet that using digital media changes the brain's ability to concentrate in the long term. It may even be making us smarter. "Today's digital tools help us see more, retain more, communicate more," says Clive Thompson, author of *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology is Changing Our Minds For the Better*.

Still, there's no denying the short-term consequences of being connected 24/7 – one in three people in the UK report feeling "overwhelmed" by new technology, according to a recent BT-sponsored study by the University of Cambridge. And, as our stress levels rise, so does the desire to switch off – in the US, the fourth National Day of Unplugging takes place from sunset to sunset on March 7-8 (nationaldayofunplugging.com).

It's no coincidence that one of the growth areas in software is anti-distraction apps such as Freedom (for Windows, Apple Mac and Android) and Self-Control (for Apple Mac), which allow you to disable internet access for a set amount of time while working. The next generation of software, which stops users before they get distracted, alerting them when their attention has wandered, is in production.

But there's more to unplugging than simply pressing "Power Off" – as a recent survey by flight comparison website justtheflight.co.uk found, while 65 per cent of respondents said they intended to unplug from work emails on holiday, only two out of three could resist the urge.

There's a compulsive element to reading email, Thompson says – research shows that we get a small hit of dopamine, one of the brain's happy chemicals, when we open some emails. But as not every message is positive, there's an element of unpredictability thrown

'There is something about people being together and unplugged that creates its own momentum'

into the mix similar to playing a slot machine. It's this "intermittent reinforcement" that makes it so compulsive, as checking your email more often increases your chances of getting a hit.

The UK's first technology addiction clinic for teenagers opened recently at the Capio Nightingale Hospital in London, and in the US, the Bradford Regional Medical Center in Pennsylvania offers an inpatient digital version of the 12-step programme for drug and alcohol dependence. In China, Korea and Taiwan, digital rehab clinics are already mainstream.

You may not see yourself checking into digital rehab any time soon, but what about a digital detox? According to a recent World Travel Market trend forecast, more of us will be opting to go on such holidays or retreats this year. One of the most popular destinations, Camp Grounded (campgrounded.org) in Navarro, California, aims to be a "summer camp for adults" where they can "disconnect to reconnect", says Levi Felix, director and founder of Camp Grounded, and thedigitaldetox.org, which

runs retreats in remote places throughout the world, as well as "unplugged" drinks parties.

Felix believes you get something extra at a digital detox retreat that you wouldn't get from checking into a health spa. "There is something about hundreds of people being together and being unplugged that creates its own momentum. We talk a lot about what we don't like about our tech habits and people decide to make their own changes, like no devices in the bedroom, no phones at the table, no push notifications," he says.

"Many people get in touch afterwards and tell us about the changes it's made – whether it's an improved sex life as they're now paying attention to their partner rather than their phone, or weight loss, as they're now eating mindfully."

In the UK, the first such retreat (digitaldetoxing.com) is run, ironically, by a digital marketing guru, Martin Talks, former president of digital strategy agency Drafftcb London and author of *A-Z of Digital Detoxing: A Practical Family Guide*. "Although I've spent the past 20 years persuading people to spend more time on their screens, I realise there needs to be a balance, and time spent away from the screen is just as important," he says. "A digital detox is a kick-start, a way of raising awareness of your screen habits and exploring alternatives to the screen."

Talks holds his retreats in a remote cottage in Norfolk that doesn't have electricity, and there is a back-to-nature feel. "I wanted to take people out of their comfort zones," he says. "I have a 'no watches' rule as there's a strong connection between digital tech and time. We think we are being more productive, better people by constantly being connected. In fact, we are disconnecting ourselves from the important things like emotions, practical skills and thoughtful reflection."

He also organises "secret switch-off" weekends, which involve turning up at an airport with your passport. "You spend a weekend at an unnamed location which may be in Europe or North Africa with a group of people from similar businesses, with no technology or watches. The focus is on peer-solving problems, but also on fun." Dare you?

■ Digital detox retreats for corporate groups run by Tom Chatfield can be booked at the School of Life in London: info@theschooloflife.com

10 SECRETS OF DIY DIGITAL DETOXING

1 TAKE A QUESTIONING APPROACH TO HOW YOU WORK – ARE YOU WORKING PROACTIVELY OR REACTIVELY? ARE YOU FULLY ENGAGED WITH THE TASK IN HAND? WHEN YOU'RE ONLINE, ARE YOU RESEARCHING OR PUTTING OFF DOING SOMETHING ELSE?

2 Practise “conscious computing” – be aware of your posture and the depth of your breathing.

3 Try the Focus Block. Schedule chunks of time most days of the week to focus on your most important tasks, during which there should be no email, internet or phone access.

4 Set boundaries. No emailing after 9pm, no phones in the bathroom or on the table during meals, and no gadgets in the bedroom are the basics.

5 Use internet-blocking software. Freedom (US\$10 from macfreedom.com), an app for Apple Mac, Windows and Android, blocks online access for up to eight hours but allows you to maintain access to printers and other computers if you're working collaboratively.

6 DISABLE YOUR PHONE ON HOLIDAY. DIGITAL DETOX (FREE FROM GOOGLE PLAY), AN APP FOR ANDROID USERS, DISABLES THE INTERNET ON YOUR PHONE FOR UP TO A MONTH.

7 Block social media. Self-Control (free from selfcontrolapp.com), for Apple Macs blocks sites such as Facebook for up to 24 hours and you can't override it even if you restart your computer.

8 Face up to procrastination. Rescue Time (free, rescuetime.com), a download for Apple Mac, PC and Android, tracks the time you spend on email and other applications, giving you a graph of how you spend your time online.

9 Turn off all push notifications, then choose set times for checking email and social media sites.

10 DON'T GO COLD TURKEY. IF YOU'RE PLANNING A DEVICE-FREE HOLIDAY, TRY UNPLUGGING FOR A SHORT PERIOD EVERY DAY FOR A MONTH BEFOREHAND, GRADUALLY INCREASING YOUR TIME OFFLINE.



'A digital detox retreat changed the way I work'

DANIEL TEWELES, a digital communications strategist and the chief executive of Global Natives, attended a retreat in Cambodia last year run by Digital Detox Retreats.

"I reached a point where I needed some perspective. The retreat was held in a remote beach location and, in many ways, it was like a holiday, but with added thinking. Every night, a note was pushed under your door with a question for you to ponder. We also did some group sessions where we talked about how we used technology. There were lots of activities such as hikes, art sessions and sunrise yoga, but everything was optional.

"It gave me the space to think about things I'd needed to consider for a while and I made some decisions to change my business model and how I prioritise my time. I've made some changes since I got back that I've stuck to – like not working on Saturdays, not putting my phone on the table when I'm in a meeting, and walking home from work with my dog."

■ **Digital Detox Retreats for 12 people are held in remote resorts worldwide and cost from US\$585 per person per week, excluding flights. Corporate packages can also be arranged.**

HUGH CARLING, chief executive of mobile research platform Live Minds, attended a Digital Detoxing Adventures retreat in Norfolk last year.

"It was very rustic – the first thing we saw when we walked in the front door was a snakeskin that had been shed recently. But it was all part of doing something different and being taken slightly out of your comfort zone. We spent the time doing back-to-basics stuff like sketching the windmills and marshlands – something I hadn't done since school and which I very much enjoyed. We also played marsh cricket but had to mow a strip of marshland first.

"The hardest part was not knowing the score of the Ashes, something I'd normally check at least every half-hour. That was agony. But it soon felt liberating, particularly when it came to properly engaging in conversation and knowing that neither you nor the other person was going to be interrupted by a phone.

"The retreat was a chance to look at where you need to fully engage in the present moment rather than with half a mind on the email you're expecting. Throughout the weekend we worked individually and collaboratively on pledges for changes we would make on leaving. Mine was to be more aware of how I use my phone when I'm around my two young children. Now I don't check my phone during meals or when it's their bedtime.

"It has opened my eyes to the value of not being interrupted. Now at work we set aside two hours first thing to work on our most important task and disconnect from email and phones."

■ **Digital Detoxing Adventures retreats for groups of five to six take place in Norfolk in May, June and July and cost £299 per person or £1,495 per group for two nights. Corporate packages can be arranged.**

■ **Visit digitaldetoxing.com**

'I reached a point where I needed some perspective'

'The hardest part for me was not knowing the score of the Ashes'