

# 15 Tips TO SPEND LESS TIME ONLINE

*Many of us would like to spend less time online engrossed in our screens, but how can we break the habit? Journalist Jocelyn de Kwant offers fifteen tips for avoiding the Internet temptation.*

During a recent three-week vacation, I decided to go completely offline. I was ready for a break and it felt so liberating: It was as if all the noise in my head was silenced. I was completely cut off from everyday life back home. Remarkably, the teenager traveling with me—we were away with friends—shared the same experience. Her parents put her on an ‘Internet crash diet’: For three weeks, she could only indulge in one day of Internet access. And yet, she never did take advantage of that one-day offer. She enjoyed being offline, despite her expectations. “If I don’t have anything to do,” she said, “then I can just calmly think about what I want to do. Do I want to read a book, do I want to go swimming, do I want to play a game?” Apparently she was so consumed by Instagram, Snapchat and WhatsApp in her daily life that this was an entirely new experience for her. At that moment, I was happy I grew up in the pre-digital age.

I came home rested and full of good intentions to curb my Internet habit. Other than one comment from a friend (“Check your apps!”) no one seemed to have a problem with it—or at least, not openly. Some were even envious. Despite my good intentions, however, less than a week after returning home I was back to being glued to my phone. It seems that in the real world, I apparently not only cannot do without, I can’t even cut back.

A British marketing research study found that the average smartphone user checks their phone 221 times a day. When I read that, my first thought was: I think it’s more than that. I find people use their phones more often. Not only people like me, but also scientists, philosophers, writers and CEOs. Of course not everything about using your smartphone is bad—it can also be fun, convenient, inspirational and entertaining. But there is an unsettling amount of research into the use of social media and most of the researchers seem to agree on one thing: It should be used less.

As Ap Dijksterhuis, a Dutch social psychologist, says, “The new scientific trend is the concept of a Low Information Diet: Not keeping your email open or ‘apping’ the whole day. You really have to schedule a specific timeframe in which to do these things and then you’ll feel more relaxed. Currently people don’t do that very often, but maybe in five years people will start to do it more—otherwise we’ll go crazy. This kind of advice needs to be repeated over and over again before it can start catching on. If we’re being honest, we were also saying that smoking was bad for 30 years before the number of smokers in the world actually began to decline. Change is a slow process.”

So how can we make social media a nice place where we occasionally go to find something fun, instead of an addictive, time-wasting, my-life-is-better-than-yours competition? Here are fifteen tips:

**1 SEE IT AS AN ADDICTION**  
It helps to admit that you might be addicted—addicted to the rush of dopamine that you get when you’re searching for ‘news’. “We are permanently searching for the reward of distraction,” says Cal Newport, associate professor of computer science at Georgetown University in the US and author of *Deep Work*, in an interview with the Dutch

newspaper *De Volkskrant*. It’s no coincidence that we stare so often at our screens because all apps are made by companies who benefit financially from our using their services as much as possible. It’s designed so that we keep on communicating through their products, and to ensure that this continues they pull every trick possible: neurological, psychological, sociological and so on. Which is good to know.

**2 DO THE MATH**  
Awareness is the first step toward change. Start keeping track of your daily phone usage: Put a mark in your agenda every time you look at your phone and then add the marks up (there’s also an app for that). It may only take about ten minutes to check a phone (estimate) but it takes half an hour to regain concentration (fact).

**3 TURN OFF NOTIFICATIONS**  
Everything that rings, beeps or flashes is a distraction—not only to you but also to those around you. We tend to make new information a priority and, on top of that, it’s hard not to be curious or to think: It might be important. Keep your phone on silent and only peek at it every once in a while.

**4 DESIGNATE TIME**  
To end your phone-checking habit, start splitting your day into online and offline blocks of time. “The capacity to think about our own behavior is limited,” says Dijksterhuis. “Most of our behavior is determined by routine—devoid of critical thinking.” Choose a time when you’d like to be offline and let those around you know. They’ll quickly get used to it (and so will you). For extra support, you can put your phone on airplane mode or you can use the Freedom app—tell it how long you want to be offline and it blocks everything (except for phone calls). >



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The way you handle it in your life  
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WHY IT'S GOOD TO  
GO OFFLINE

In a coordinated response to digital excess, a group of organizations sponsors the National Day of Unplugging, a 24-hour period without technology. Participants in the 2014 National Day of Unplugging were asked why they participated. Responses varied from the poetic to the principled and included a desire to:

- \* Recharge and reboot my life
- \* Spend quality time with the family
- \* Restore the beauty of daily life
- \* Live in the moment
- \* Reconnect with the real world

From: *Singletasking: Get More Done—One Thing at a Time*, by Devora Zack

**5 PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT**  
Staying offline takes practice. Most of us are not used to doing nothing or only concentrating on one thing for a long period of time. To get comfortable with ‘dead time’, as Newport calls it, start with short periods of offline time and then gradually increase the duration. Try to not let yourself feel guilty for doing nothing: Any anxiety you might experience will slowly fade.

**6 LEAVE YOUR PHONE IN YOUR BAG**  
If you really want to connect with people, leave your phone in your bag. In 2012 two British psychologists observed conversations with and without a phone on the table. When a phone was present, even though it was on silent, the participants felt less of a connection and less mutual empathy; the conversations felt superficial. Source: *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, by Sherry Turkle

**7 LEAVE YOUR PHONE AT HOME FROM TIME TO TIME**  
‘The further removed we are from temptation, the better positioned we are to stick with our best intentions. Technology isn’t the problem. The way you handle it in your life is the crux of the matter,’ writes American strategy consultant, coach and author Devora Zack in her book *Singletasking*. Even if you are only going around the block, grocery shopping or to the gym, leave your phone at home to avoid temptation.

**8 BUY AN OLD-FASHIONED ALARM CLOCK**  
In his book *Night School*, British psychologist Richard Wiseman writes about a study published in 2014 on the use of smartphones and tablets right before going to sleep. The study revealed

that 90 percent of teenagers in the UK are sleep-deprived because the light from the digital screens makes it harder to fall asleep. His advice: Keep your phone out of the bedroom and buy an alarm clock.

**9 YOU NEED QUIET**  
According to an experiment conducted by *The New York Times*, continuously checking social media ruins our concentration and the distraction literally makes us 20 percent dumber. This also makes it harder (or completely impossible) to think of new ideas. Robbert Dijkgraaf, director of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University in the US, did a beautiful job explaining the importance of peace and quiet in an interview with the Dutch news service, NRC. “Think of peace and quiet as something lying on the bottom of a swimming pool,” he says. “When the water is completely still you can see it. Only in this stillness can new things happen, ideas find the space to surface and new breakthroughs emerge.”

**10 CLEAN UP YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA**  
When you look through your Facebook, Twitter or Instagram do you see people or companies who you don’t really know or who annoy you? When we like something a few too many times, an algorithm sends push notifications to our feed and we see those posts instead of the updates from our real friends. If we occasionally make sure that what we see is what we want to see—by adjusting our notification settings—we can remove a lot of unnecessary information. WhatsApp group chats can also be looked at in the same way: Which chats occupy too much of your time and can easily be left? You can always send a friendly, ‘I’ll talk to you guys

later!’ instead of just leaving with the automatic message, ‘[your name] has left the group’, which is always a little upsetting to read.

**11 REMEMBER, IT’S OVERRATED**  
If you use social media to supplement your social life, then you have nothing to worry about, but research suggests that you might become depressed if you replace your social life with social media. Another study found that Facebook helps keep friendships alive longer by removing the natural drifting that occurs when you don’t regularly see someone in person. You can’t expect that friends won’t eventually become acquaintances, however, if you don’t meet them every once in a while. It’s still very important to get together in person.

**12 MAKE PLANS OFFLINE**  
Recently one of my neighbors spontaneously organized a barbecue. He decided it would be planned without using an app. He has a love/hate relationship with the neighborhood app: It’s nice and handy, but the app doesn’t always work and, really, how difficult is it to just come over? He invited three neighbors and then asked each one of them to invite three neighbors. It turned out to be a lovely afternoon without the hassle of endlessly texting about the time, place and how many side dishes to bring.

**13 HAVE A TECH-FREE HOLIDAY**  
Many studies show that tech-free holidays are beneficial, but reading that



tech guys seek out these vacations is even more telling. Bill Gates takes a ‘Think Week’ twice a year. He hides himself away in a cottage by a lake to think and read completely undisturbed.

**14 MAKE THE MOVE TO OFFLINE**  
As a rule of thumb: No screens while in motion (so while cycling, walking, on your scooter or in the car). You benefit in two ways: You have more time to think, for one. As the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, “All truly great thoughts are conceived by walking”. And secondly, you have less chance of getting into an accident. Our brain can’t distinguish between almost getting hit by a car and a flashing message notification.

**15 TURN IT AROUND**  
What’s even crazier is now we have less patience when we’re waiting for a response, which reminds me of American-Canadian neuroscientist and writer Daniel J. Levitin (author of the book *The Organized Mind*). “You may be inclined to think that it’s rude not to answer right away,” he says, “but you should try it sometime. How rude is it to expect an immediate answer or to expect that you should immediately take priority over what the other person is doing at the time? We need to relearn how to respect each other’s time.” ●

- WANT TO READ MORE?
- \* ‘The Distracted Mind’, by Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen
  - \* ‘Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World’, by Cal Newport
  - \* ‘Singletasking: Get More Done—One Thing at a Time’, by Devora Zack
  - \* ‘Night School: Wake up to the Power of Sleep’, by Richard Wiseman
  - \* ‘Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age’, by Sherry Turkle
  - \* ‘The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload’, by Daniel J. Levitin

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