

Time to switch off

It's not just teenagers who can't leave technology alone – we ask the experts to help us step away from our smartphones



When did you last check your phone for an email or text? Ten minutes ago? Two minutes ago? What about Facebook? When did you post your last update or have a look at what your friends are up to?

It only takes a couple of days with a new smartphone or tablet to succumb to the lure of having all that information at the swipe of a finger. You may not think of yourself as an addict, but scientists at the University of North Carolina discovered that we get a jolt of dopamine,

a neurotransmitter associated with addiction, when someone likes a post or retweets us, so it's worth noting how often you indulge in social media activities. 'We're social beings, always looking for ways to connect with people and chasing positive reinforcement,' says Dr Lisa Wilson, chartered psychologist at City Psychology Group. 'There's a danger that this constant need to text, email or update means squeezing more into the same amount of time, loading on the stress and pressure.' Here are the warning signs:

Does this sound familiar?

1 You log on to Facebook before bed

Nothing wrong with a little late-night nosy into your friends' lives, you think, and, in most cases, you're right. But what if you see something that upsets or niggles you or you get no replies or likes to one of your posts? 'This is not conducive to the calm, relaxed state of mind you need before sleep,' says Dr Wilson. 'You become over-stimulated and start interpreting and evaluating, which impacts on the quality of your sleep.' The key is to keep your laptop and phone out of the bedroom. 'If it takes you half an hour to wind your mind down after checking updates, then make sure you switch off early enough to give yourself that time before trying to sleep,' adds Dr Wilson.

2 You plan/check/compare everything online

In these days of triple-dip recessions and redundancies, it's no wonder we try to get the best deal on holidays, credit cards and the latest Monsoon dress. But chasing to save every penny has consequences. 'Too much choice is stressful in itself and we have to think about the cost/time ratio,' says Dr Gail Kinman, professor of occupational health psychology at the University of Bedfordshire. 'Yes, you may save some money, but could you have used all that time better?' Have a plan: 'Limit yourself by searching a finite number of websites before making a decision, or use a timer and stick to a time,' suggests Dr Richard Graham, consultant psychiatrist at London's Tavistock and Portman hospital.

3 You check your phone as soon as you wake up

It's become as important a part of your morning routine as brushing your teeth. 'You're scared you'll have missed out on something,' believes Dr Kinman. 'Being out of the loop can make you feel panicky and out of control.' For some, those early moments looking at your phone can be a breather from the roller coaster of the day. 'It can give you a few precious minutes before the morning routine kicks off,' says Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit* (£13.99, Random House). 'But perhaps another activity, such as getting up earlier and having a shower, or teaching your children a different routine, can provide the same reward. It's a habit, so the key is to change it, not extinguish it.'



6 A recent study suggests Facebook is more addictive than alcohol or cigarettes*

4 You won't go on holiday without wi-fi

Our busy, 24/7 lives mean there's not many of us who stick on 'out of office' and disappear for two weeks. There's the thirst to know what's going on, the fear we might be missing out and the fact we have to live up to everybody's expectations. 'At work, we worry that if we lie low, someone will step into our shoes,' says Dr Wilson. 'But ask yourself, when you get to 80, do you want your life to have been all about achieving at work, or achieving balance with your family? Get in touch with your values and remember what the holiday is about.' Naturally, if work is important, especially if you're self-employed or running your own business, you will need to stay in touch, but limit your wi-fi window to an hour a day. 'And before you go, make it clear to work contacts that's what you're going to do, so expectations are lowered,' adds Dr Wilson.

5 Every real moment has to be recorded

Whether it's posting endless pictures of your kids on Facebook, or tweeting everything you've read, baked or seen, recording your experiences for the masses may mean you suffer from low self-esteem and need constant reassurance. 'You feel as if you need to be constantly interesting,' says Dr Graham. 'But what you're really doing is diminishing the value of your memories, and not focusing on the now.' Dr Wilson blames wanting to feel connected with people even if you have no time to see them. 'Try to have more meaningful relationships with a narrower group of people who matter,' she suggests. 'Instead of recording moments and tweeting them, pick up the phone and have a conversation.'

In my case 'I turn off for my family'

Keira O'Mara, 35, from Birmingham, owner of Mama Designs, says:



As I work from home, inventing baby products, when I'm not on my laptop officially working, I'm checking my phone 10 times an hour, even when watching TV or playing with my children, aged six and three. I have

work Facebook and Twitter pages, as well as a personal Facebook page, and like to respond quickly to comments, as well as emails. But it was distracting me from the kids, who would get upset having to ask a question twice before I noticed. So now I try to leave my phone in a different room at certain points of the day so I can focus on quality time with them. It's hard, and I'm often itching to log back on, but my children are benefiting and I feel a lot less stressed.'