Between Screens and Sanity: A Review of the Promises and Pitfalls of Digital Detox

Shekinah Dokka

KLE JN Medical College

ABSRACT :

Since digital technologies become a rapidly integral part of daily life, concerns about their excessive use are increasing. In response, the digital detox has emerged as a purposeful way to retreat from the screen and build healthy digital habits. This review explains what the current research says how effective digital detox intervention is, especially in promoting wellness and reducing technical dependence. Evidence points to promising results, especially when detox strategies include mindfulness, time in nature and clear boundaries on screen uses. Nevertheless, there are obstacles for long -term success, including the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), the risk of slipping back into the old habits, and the lack of a clear, shared definition of what "digital detox" actually means. Ultimately, digital detox works best when it is supported by extensive efforts at both flexible, personal and social and institutional levels.

Keywords: Digital detox, Digital abstinence, Digital fasting, Well-being, Smartphone abstinence, Mental health, Technostress, Unplugging.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, technological advancements, particularly in gadgets and the Internet, have increasingly become a central part of everyday life. The shift accelerated following the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, during which people from all walks of life, including children, had to rely heavily on digital devices for work, education, and entertainment. However, this widespread reliance has also led to a concerning trend: many individuals are now engaging with these technologies in excessive and potentially harmful ways, often resulting in gadget addiction.[1]

There is growing concern that the use of digital technologies, particularly social media, poses risks to public health-most notably affecting the mental well-being of children and adolescents. In May 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory highlighting the urgency of addressing youth mental health, warning that social media may significantly contribute to psychological harm among young people. The advisory emphasized the need for a "safety-first" strategy to maximize potential benefits while minimizing negative impacts. Simultaneously, the American Academy of Paediatrics, with support from federal funding, established a dedicated center aimed at exploring the intersection of mental health and social media use among children and adolescents.[2]

A major contribution to these issues is "Technostress", which results in excessive use or misuse of technology. Technostress is characterized by negative emotional and physical reactions such as anxiety, irritability, frustration and fatigue. An important driver of this stress is fear of missing out (FOMO), which inspires individuals to be constantly connected to social media or digital technologies to avoid disappearance of significant updates or social engagement.[3]

Despite increasing awareness, there is a lack of intensive research in the experience of psychological effects, when they take a break from using their smartphones, often the main entrance for digital life. Searching for these effects can provide valuable insight and either support or question what we currently believe about the mental health effects of smartphone addiction.[4]

Given the rising concerns about the toll of digital overexposure on health, there is increasing interest in strategies promoting healthy digital habits. Digital detox, as a behavioural intervention, wants to retaliate harmful effects of continuous connectivity. This paper reviews current research to explore whether such detox practices can genuinely support mental and physical well-being, reduce symptoms of digital dependency, and offer a sustainable solution to the growing challenge of gadget addiction in the digital age.

CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

The concept of digital detox is interpreted in varied ways across the literature. While some studies define it as a complete disconnection from digital devices, others emphasize a more flexible and mindful approach, focusing on intentional technology use rather than total avoidance. Recognizing the lack of clarity in how digital detox is understood, Marx et al. (2025) reviewed a broad range of existing definitions and, through detailed semantic analysis, synthesized a clearer, multidisciplinary understanding, resulting in the following definition: "*Digital detox involves an intentionally set time frame in which individuals reduce the use of one or more digital device(s) and/or application(s) to cope with or prevent negative side effects of this use to foster a healthy and balanced relationship with technology.*" [5]

The concept of digital detox is rooted in the growing awareness of the psychological and physiological effects of constant connectivity, such as anxiety, sleep disturbances, reduced attention span, and digital fatigue.[3] In this review, "digital detox" is used as an overarching term encompassing related concepts such as abstinence, digital fasting, unplugging, and technology detoxification etc. These practices aim to restore balance between online and offline life, promote mindfulness, and enhance overall well-being.[6] This idea has gained momentum as worries about digital dependence grow, and it's now finding its way into wellness programs, therapy approaches, and workplace health initiatives.

DIGITAL DETOX AND MENTAL HEALTH

Several studies have explored the impact of digital detox on mental health outcomes. Wilcockson et al. (2019) investigated the psychological effects of a 24-hour smartphone abstinence and found that while mood and anxiety levels remained unchanged, craving for smartphone use increased significantly, indicating psychological dependence without meeting criteria for addiction, which would typically involve mood deterioration or heightened anxiety during withdrawal.[4] In contrast, a study by Brown and Kuss (2020), as cited in a systematic review, examined a seven-day digital detox intervention and reported a moderate improvement in mental well-being, suggesting that a longer, structured break from digital engagement may positively influence psychological health.[7] Additionally, another systematic review focusing on digital social media detox concluded that, although changes in mental well-being were not statistically significant, digital detox interventions may help reduce depressive symptoms by limiting exposure to digital stressors such as negative social comparisons, cyberbullying, and information overload. By temporarily disconnecting from these digital stressors, individuals may experience improvements in mood and a decrease in depressive symptomatology.[8]

Overall, these outcomes suggest that the mental health benefits of digital detox may vary by duration and context, with longer or targeted detox periods showing greater promise for improving well-being.

EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE

Study	Year	Population	Design	Findings
Wilcockson T.D.W et al.[4]	2019	45 participants	Experimental study design	1. Craving Increased Significantly 2. Mood and Anxiety Were Not Significantly Affected 3. Craving Correlated with Smartphone Addiction Scores 4. Dropouts Had Higher Addiction Scores
Sonali S Deshbhratar et al.[9]	2017	150 individuals	Mixed-methods approach	1. Decrease in anxiety 2. Improvement in sleep 3. Boost in cognitive function 4. Enhanced quality of life
Ms. Soumya Sonalika et al.[10]	2025	500 adolescents	Pre-experimental Randomized Control design	1. Reduced excessive device use among adolescents 2. Improving overall well-being
Lina Christin Brockmeier et al.[11]	2025	787 participants	Two-condition Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT)	Self-efficacy improved and mediated behaviour change
Turki M. Alanzi et al. [12]	2024	467 participants	Pre-post intervention study (quasi-experimental design)	Significant reduction in anxiety and depression across all groups

METHODS AND STRATEGIES FOR DIGITAL DETOX

Effective digital detox requires more than just intention; it involves practical strategies that support sustainable behavioural change. Various approaches have been developed to help individuals reduce screen time, manage digital distractions, and restore balance between online and offline life. Below are some of the most commonly recommended and evidence-based strategies.

Establishing Tech-Free Zones

Creating designated areas like bedrooms or dining tables as device-free spaces encourages face-to-face interaction, improves sleep hygiene, and supports relaxation.

Setting Screen Time Limits

Using strategies like the Pomodoro Technique (dividing work into intervals) or scheduled digital sabbaths helps manage screen exposure and promotes a healthier online–offline balance.

Practicing Mindful Tech Use

Practices like meditation, digital breaks, and mindful breathing can help people become more aware of the present moment and make more intentional, thoughtful choices about how they use technology.

Reconnecting with Nature

Spending time in natural environments through walking, gardening, or outdoor activities, offers a restorative break from digital overload. Nature engagement has been shown to reduce stress, enhance mood, support cognitive function, and promote overall physical well-being. It also contributes to better sleep, hormonal balance, and healthy aging by improving circulation, reducing cortisol, and encouraging social interaction.[13]

Behavioural Modifications

 Uninstalling non-essential apps, reducing social media use, and engaging in offline activities like sports or reading.[10]

Enhancing Self-Control and Sleep Hygiene

Practices like disabling notifications, powering off devices in the evening, and strengthening self-control have been associated with improved sleep quality and increased next-day productivity. [6]

Digital Detox Apps

Apps designed to track and limit smartphone usage can help lessen the harmful effects of social media on mental well-being.[6]

Reducing Phubbing

Keeping phones out of sight during conversations enhances in-person interactions and strengthens social connections.[3]

Bedroom Device Boundaries

Keeping digital devices out of the bedroom supports better sleep quality and promotes a calm, distraction-free environment.[3]

Workplace Initiatives

Organizations can promote digital well-being by introducing scheduled device-free periods and offering workshops focused on healthy digital habits and screen-time management.[12]

Gradual Disengagement vs. Sudden Withdrawal

Digital detox can be approached either by gradually reducing screen time or by quitting abruptly ("cold turkey"). The gradual reduction provides a smooth transition-especially for adolescents-by creating technical-free habits with time. In contrast, sudden withdrawal can trigger symptoms of acute discomfort and withdrawal, which increases the risk of relaxation.[14]

DIFFICULTIES IN DISCONNECTING: THE DETOX DILEMMA

Despite growing awareness of the negative impacts of excessive screen time, disconnecting from digital devices remains a complex and often frustrating experience. The digital detox dilemma lies in the tension between the desire to unplug and the dependence on technology for everyday functioning. Below are several key barriers that commonly hinder successful digital disengagement:

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO):

FOMO is a common psychological barrier for digital detox, characterized by anxiety when it is done out of online activities or updates. This often conducts compulsory examination of social media and disrupts efforts to disconnect.

Post-Detox Overload

A common challenge after a digital detox is facing an overwhelming surge of notifications and messages, which can increase stress and deter future attempts to disconnect.

Rebound Effect and Loss of Self-Control

Some individuals struggle with self-control post-detox, often reverting to their previous patterns of excessive digital use, a phenomenon known as rebound overuse.

Practical Constraints

Individuals who rely on technology for work or necessary communication may seem impractical or impossible to completely decompose it, can limit their ability to participate in digital detox interventions.[1]

Discomfort and Temptation

Feelings of restlessness or boredom are common at the start of a digital detox, often tempting individuals to abandon the process prematurely. [15]

Lack of Engaging Alternatives

A major challenge during digital detox is finding meaningful offline activities to replace time previously spent on screens, which can hinder sustained disengagement. [16]

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

- Future research should look beyond short -term results and focus on long -term follow -up to understand how digital detox intervention affects mental health, productivity and overall digital welfare over time.

- Use of words such as "digital detox" and "screen time reduction" vary in studies, exposing the need for clear, standardized definitions to improve stability in research.
- More attention should be paid to how individual factors such as self-efficiency, inspiration and behaviour control digital detox efforts shape the success of efforts.
- It requires comparative studies to evaluate what type of digital detox intervention works best, allowing researchers and physicians to allow tailor approach for various requirements and settings.

CONCLUSION

As digital technologies are increasingly woven into nearly every aspect of daily life, the need for intentional disengagement through digital detox has become increasingly apparent. This review highlights that digital detox interventions can offer significant mental and physical health benefits. These include reduced anxiety, improved sleep, and enhanced cognitive functioning. However, how well these interventions work often depends on things like how long the detox lasts, a person's individual habits, and the influence of their social environment.

Experimental and observational studies suggest that structured and sustained interventions are more effective than short-term abstinence, particularly when supported by strategies like mindfulness, nature engagement, and screen-time boundaries. Nonetheless, several barriers persist. Psychological barriers such as FOMO, the rebound effect, and post-detox overwhelm often limit long-term success, while practical constraints make full disconnection unrealistic for many.

Digital detox should therefore be viewed not as a one-size-fits-all solution, but rather as a flexible, adaptive approach tailored to individual needs and supported by broader institutional and societal changes. In an age where being constantly connected has become the norm, digital detox offers a pathway to reclaiming balance- between screens and sanity.

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