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Less Technology, More Happiness?

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"Please put your phone down Daddy, we haven't finished the story!". Hearing these heartfelt words from my four year old daughter was an uncomfortable wake up call. How had I let the shiny electronic box in my hand take so much of my attention that it could even interrupt a short bedtime story with my precious children?

It's no exaggeration to suggest that our mobile devices are in danger of taking over our entire lives. Time magazine found that 68% of users take their devices to bed with them, 20% check their phones every ten minutes and one third report feeling anxious when briefly separated from their beloved gadget. According to Osterman research, 79% of respondents take their work-related device on vacation and 33% admit to hiding from family and friends in order to check Facebook and Twitter. It's hard to deny that these are worrying trends.

So it's no surprise we're starting to see a backlash against the all-pervasive nature of digital devices. Companies like Digital Detox are now offering technology-free breaks where people have no choice but to disconnect. Their Camp Grounded summer camp is a place where "grown-ups go to unplug, getaway and be kids again". One of the signs at the camp reads "The use of WMDs is not permitted" - an acronym that refers to Wireless Mobile Devices, although many clearly see these devices as Weapons of Mass Destruction too!

There's no doubt that we need to restore some balance to our technology-dominated lives. But in my view the salvation from our digital gluttony lies more in our daily habits than in special events like Camp Grounded, wonderful as they may be. Before looking at some possible solutions, let's not forget that the main reason we become so addicted to these gadgets is that they provide incredible benefits. We can communicate with distant friends and loved ones at the touch of a button. We can stay connected with what's going on in the world. We can share what matters to us with the people we care about. And we can put travel time or waiting time to more productive use - potentially freeing up extra family and leisure time later. When used well, these devices can greatly enhance our overall wellbeing.

The problem of course is that many of us - myself included - spend so much time using these devices that we end up doing things that are detrimental to wellbeing - not just for ourselves but for others around us too. We strive to use our time efficiently, but end up leaving ourselves unable to unwind and get to sleep. We want to stay up to speed, but end up so overwhelmed with digital noise that we miss the information that really matters. We want to be connected to others, but end up ignoring the people we're actually with - perhaps best exemplified in this powerful and poignant video. So here are my three suggested ground rules - or habits - for living well in an age of digital overconsumption.

1. Pay full attention to what you're doing

Social media, emails and other electronic messages have a nasty habit of distracting us from whatever we're doing. But evidence shows that when our minds are constantly distracted, we're not only less effective at what we're doing, this also makes us much less happy. So instead of just reacting to these digital attention-grabbers the moment they appear, make a conscious decision to

ignore them if you're doing certain things - such as writing, having a conversation or eating a meal. There's even a new conscious computing movement to help us do this - with innovations like MyFocus which disables all your digital distractions at the touch of one physical button. Equally, it can help to set aside specific times when you'll focus entirely on responding to all the digital stuff too.

2. Ask yourself "what matters most?"

We're so programmed to respond to our gadgets that we unconsciously give them priority over things that, on reflection, we would surely agree matter much more. So when technology grabs your attention, make a habit of consciously asking yourself "what matters most?". Is it more important to read and respond to this immediately - or to get a good night's sleep and be ready for tomorrow? Is it more important to check the latest headlines or get outside for 10 minutes of fresh air and head space? Is it more important to share my hilarious status update or make sure I'm home in time to see the kids? These questions have easy answers - and big implications for our use of technology - if we bother to ask them.

3. Give face-to-face priority over virtual

Our relationships are the most important contributors to our overall wellbeing, especially those with our nearest and dearest. Yet although technology helps us stay in touch with a wider range of people and connects us with loved ones in far off places, nothing beats our face-to-face relationships with the people that matter - our partners, parents, children and closest friends. So make it a habit to give the people you're with priority over the gadget you're holding. Or as this rather beautiful advert from Thailand reminds us, "disconnect to connect". One fun way of

making sure this happens is for a group of friends or family members to agree to put their mobile devices in a pile and not use them while together. Some groups apparently even spice this idea up by agreeing that whoever can't resist and picks up their phone first has to pick up the bill too!

Rebalancing our use of technology doesn't require an appeal to our guilt or an assault on our productivity. It requires us to be more mindful and honest with ourselves about when these devices bring real benefits and when they start to ruin our quality of life. The many benefits are only worth it if they contribute to our overall happiness rather than undermining it.

At Action for Happiness we encourage actions to help people live happier and more fulfilling lives like these Ten Keys to Happier Living. And while there are many digital innovations that can help to boost our happiness - for example apps like Headspace or Happify - many of the most important sources of happiness in life are blissfully technology-free. So finally, here are three simple, non-digital actions that are proven to make us happier:

- **Get active outdoors** - walk through the park, get off the bus a stop early or go for a "walking meeting" with a colleague

- **Take a breathing space** - regularly stop and take 5 minutes to just breathe and be in the moment - notice how you're feeling and what's going on around you

- **Make someone else happy** - do random acts of kindness, offer to help, give away your change, pay a compliment or tell someone how much they mean to you

When we focus on the things that really bring happiness, our priorities shift and our relationships with our digital devices naturally start to be become more conscious, balanced and fulfilling.