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Too Much Screen Time? How It Affects Mental Health and What to Do About It

Screens are an inescapable part of modern life, from smartphones and tablets to computers and televisions. Whether we are at work, school, or unwinding at home, a screen is always within reach. They serve as the gateways to our household appliances, provide us with a sense of security as we monitor the outside world, and enable us to stay connected and conduct our business across time zones and geographic boundaries.

Let's be honest: our world today is hyper-connected, leading to a significant increase in the time we spend glued to screens. Scientists studying brain neuroplasticity understand how screens provide stimuli that reward us. Behaviourists and marketers meticulously craft what appears on screens to influence our behaviours, beliefs, and actions. However, this surge in screen time and our dependence on it has raised serious concerns about the long-term effects on our mental health. For children, teens, and adults, prolonged exposure to screen content can lead to issues such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances, underscoring the urgent need to address this issue.

In this article, we'll examine the realities of our screen-dominated lives and the issues that come with excessive screen use. We'll also examine the toll this is taking on our physical and emotional health

and explore ways to address this, such as by consciously reducing screen time through breaks or digital detoxes. We will also share some tips on developing greater awareness to change your behaviours and avoid adverse effects on your physical and mental well-being. By reducing screen time, you can improve your health and engage in more mindful activities.

The Digital World We Live In

People are spending more time in front of screens than ever before. Remote work and online education have helped move this forward, but we are also increasingly reliant on screens for entertainment and social interaction. Social media, video games, and streaming platforms like Netflix also encourage extended screen use.

Video Games

The rise in popularity of eSports – “organized competitive video gaming” where competitors duel other players for video game supremacy with physical and virtual stadiums of onlookers watching their gameplay, has some people concerned about this as an emerging form of addiction.¹ With eSports, players are relying on the development of “fine motor skills” more than

“improving physicality” which requires them to “spend copious amounts of time relatively sedentary in front of a screen.”² The American Psychiatric Association has recognized “Internet Gaming Disorder,” which is characterized by people feeling compelled and being preoccupied with video gaming to the point of neglecting their lives outside of gaming and ignoring the negative consequences of it.³

Streaming Services

Similarly, binge-watching has become widespread, where viewers consume multiple series episodes in one sitting. We see this driven by streaming platforms that release entire seasons of a program at once, creating a pattern that encourages addiction. It’s easy to “stream these services on your television or on another electronic device, such as a laptop, tablet, or cell phone.”⁴ However, people lose track of time and even avoid personal responsibilities, daily activities, and commitments (including work and school) in favour of staying tied to a screen. Many are “replacing time once spent exercising, socializing and sleeping,” putting them at increased risk for developing conditions such as heart disease, social isolation, and sleep disorders.⁵

Research has revealed that:

- 60% of American adults who use streaming services on-demand engage in binge-watching
- 73% of 18–29-year-olds binge-watch at least once a week
- The heaviest screen time watchers averaged 17.5 hours per day across all devices
- A study of over 3000 adults over 50 who watched more than 3.5 hours of television daily revealed that they had worse verbal memory after six years.⁶

Artificial Intelligence

With Artificial Intelligence (AI) becoming more prevalent in our daily lives and accessible through various digital devices, its presence will undoubtedly contribute to increased screen time. While there are mixed reactions—some fear losing their jobs to AI technology, others embrace how it could potentially improve lives. AI is another tool intent on delivering convenience, which makes it irresistible in our digitally reliant lives.

Worldwide Screen Time

Ultimately, we need to develop an awareness of how tech companies use neuroscience embedded in online activities where we engage through screens, manipulating use by stimulating the brain's "orienting reflex" so that we "involuntarily turn our attention" to what is on our screen compulsively.⁷ Many countries agree as research reveals how much time their citizens typically spend in front of screens daily.

- Worldwide, people spend an average of 6.5 hours in front of screens
- The countries with the top three highest average screen time use during waking hours were:
 - South Africa, at 58.21%
 - Brazil, at 56.61%
 - Philippines, at 54.44%
- North Americans fared slightly better:
 - Mexico, at 48.60%
 - United States, at 42.58%
 - Canada, at 40.24%
- When sorted by type of screen, the top three countries connecting on their phones were the Philippines, Brazil, and South Africa. South Africa, Russia, and Columbia topped the list when using computers to connect.⁸

Calls for Restricting Screen Time

The amount of time we spend in front of screens is alarming, and the concept of a digital detox is one potential solution to help alleviate the adverse effects of excessive screen use. The goal is to consciously reduce or eliminate screen time, either for short periods of time or longer term.

Concerns are leading some countries to create stricter policies and recommendations regarding screen time, particularly for young children and teens.

- In France, experts proposed measures meant to “encourage proper use of screen by children and to reduce their detrimental impact on children’s health.” For example, the commission recommends that children under three should not spend any time in front of screens, that they should not have a phone before age 11, and not participate in social media before age 15.⁹
- In Sweden, recommendations state that “children under the age of 2 should not be exposed to any digital screens...including television.” Maximum screen time is set to one hour a day for children ages 2 through 5, and only one additional hour is added for children ages 6-12. Teens are recommended to have no more than three hours per day.¹⁰

- In Canada, some schools are experimenting with cellphone bans to reduce distracted learning and improve student focus. However, it's being met with mixed reviews as parents and educators question how to enforce it if the policies are not comprehensive enough.¹¹ Beginning with the 2024-2025 school year, the Ontario Government has set rules for those in Kindergarten through to Grade 6 that students must keep phones "on silent and out of sight for the entire school day unless explicitly permitted by an educator." For students in Grades 7 through 12, cell phones will not be permitted during class time unless authorized by an educator. They are following up this policy with teacher training, support, and information for students and parents.¹²

The Mental Health Toll of Too Much Screen Time

One study emphasizes how "digital technology has been especially good at changing our brains without us being aware."¹³ It reports that "the average person is now using screens, by some estimates, as much as 10 hours a day. It is arguably our single biggest type of waking activity. While for some, on the lower end of that, "addiction" may just be a metaphor meaning "too dependent on" or "a compulsion," for many, the term "addiction" is literally true."¹⁴ The reality is that excessive screen time has been linked to a variety of mental health issues.

Here's how spending too much time using screens can affect well-being:

Anxiety and Stress

Social media platforms often create a space where people compare their lives to others, leading to feelings of inadequacy and stress. The constant need for validation (through likes, follower counts, and comments) can make this anxiety worse. These platforms are amplifying the pressure to maintain a perfect image online.¹⁵

Depression

The rise of screen time has also been connected to higher rates of anxiety and depression, especially in teens. Isolation caused by too much screen time can increase loneliness and sadness.¹⁶

Sleep Problems

Screens emit blue light, which interferes with melatonin production, the hormone that helps regulate sleep. When people use screens before bed, it disrupts natural sleep cycles, leading to insomnia and poor-quality sleep.¹⁷

Physical Health Decline

Another side effect of prolonged screen time is a sedentary lifestyle. Lack of movement and general reductions in physical activity contribute to weight gain and poor posture. Time is even devoted to screen-based activities rather than exercise. The

connection between physical activity and its benefits as a treatment for mental health is also an important consideration.

Visual Health

Eye strain and changes to our visual health occur with excessive use of screens. Many people report having dry eyes caused by a reduced blink rate tied to increased concentration and focus on the screen, smaller font sizes and increased squinting to reduce glare and adjust contrast. The risk of developing an "incomplete blink (upper lid does not cover the entire front surface of the eye)" also increases with screen use. One study showed that "children ages 6 to 13 years are at more risk of increasing myopia with increased digital screen time."¹⁸

Digital Addiction

Like substance addiction, digital addiction is real. Excessive screen use rewires the brain's reward system, making it difficult to disengage from social media, video games, or other online activities. It can lead to cravings for constant stimulation and affect "cognitive control, reward valuation, and motor coordination."¹⁹ This addiction can lead to dangerous behaviours, such as texting while driving or constantly seeking the next dopamine hit online through gambling, pornography, shopping, and checking social media to assess clout, influence, or review followers.

The Benefits of a Digital Detox

Many experts recommend a digital detox to combat the harmful effects of too much screen time. Taking a break from screens offers numerous benefits, including:

- Better sleep – Disconnecting from devices before bedtime allows the brain to rest properly, leading to a more restorative sleep.
- Reduced stress – Spending less time on screens lowers cortisol (the stress hormone) levels, improving mental clarity and emotional regulation.
- Increased productivity – Without digital distractions, people often find that they can focus better on tasks and feel more creative and productive.
- Improved relationships – Reducing screen time creates space for more meaningful face-to-face interactions, which strengthen emotional bonds. Taking breaks from social media can reduce social comparison and help develop better in-person relationships and confidence in live social settings

How to Create Balance Between Screen Time and Mental Health

Maintaining balance today requires intentional action. Here are some strategies to manage screen time while protecting mental health:

- Set boundaries – Scheduling specific screen-free times during the day can be a helpful way to reduce reliance on devices. Many now offer built-in features, such as Apple’s weekly screen time reports, which help users become more aware of their habits and where they are spending their time online.
- Take breaks – Spending time outdoors during the day offers many health benefits, from physical activity to sunshine and other natural visual stimuli. Practicing mindfulness techniques can also break up periods of extended screen use, offering the chance for a mental reset.
- Digital-Free evenings – Avoiding screens in the evening promotes better sleep and gives your brain a break before bed. Instead, engage in activities like reading, playing board games, or listening to music. Spending time on hobbies is another way to help fill the time previously spent on screens.
- Family and Friend Interaction – Prioritizing in-person connections can improve social confidence, reduce feelings of loneliness, and enhance overall well-being. Activities like storytelling, looking through old photo albums, or simply having a conversation can deepen relationships without the interference of screens.

Prioritizing Mental Health in the Digital Age

We often underestimate the amount of screen time we spend because we tend to think of it as the quantity of time spent rather than in terms of the value or quality of the activity. It may be good to reminisce a bit about how we functioned well before the introduction of so much screen time.

Today, prioritizing mental health means managing screen time effectively. Cutting back on screen time doesn't have to be drastic; small intentional changes like taking scheduled breaks, practicing a digital detox, or engaging in more face-to-face interactions can significantly improve overall well-being. As countries like France and Sweden suggest, taking action to reduce screen time is especially important for children and teens to protect their developing brains.

While screens are unavoidable, being mindful of how we use them can help us maintain better mental and physical health. If you want to explore more options, don't hesitate to seek advice from our Homewood Health services.

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