

LIVE healthy

Stay Wired and Still Feel Great

Are your gadgets making you tired and unfocused instead of more efficient?

Here, ways to get your computer, smartphone, and tablet to help make you healthier—and happier.

By Jennifer Abbasi



WE LIKE TO THINK OUR high-tech tools are helping us get more done faster, thanks to our 24/7 access to information and other people. And, yes, technology has considerable upsides: Staying in touch with far-flung loved ones is easier than ever, and “there’s tremendous efficiency when it comes to work, like exchanging information and

collaborating,” says Gary Small, MD, a neuroscientist at UCLA and co-author of *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind*.

But for many of us, a little too much of this good thing is actually causing a neurological phenomenon that psychiatrist Edward Hallowell, MD, author of *Driven to Distraction*, has called “attention deficit trait,” marked by distractibility and impatience. “We’re constantly scanning the

environment for a new ring or buzz,” Dr. Small says. “And there’s something irresistible about an unopened message,” Dr. Hallowell adds. “We want to keep opening them even though we know that we’re distracting ourselves, taking ourselves out of the moment, the conversation.” That’s because our brains crave newness and reward us with a feel-good squirt of the neurotransmitter dopamine every time our phone pings with a text or emails show up in our inbox. In a soon-to-be-published study from the University of Chicago, researchers found that people have a harder time resisting the tug of gadgets than any other desire, including the urge to eat, sleep, shop, and have sex.

As a result, instead of helping us multitask better, our phones, computers, texts, emails, and apps may keep us from accomplishing as much as we want to. “What people mean by multitasking is switching their attention back and forth from one task to the next,” Dr. Hallowell explains. “And every time you do that, each task loses a little bit of your attention.”

But you can organize your gadget usage so you’re not overwhelmed by the never-ending emails and those incessant pings from your BlackBerry. Here are



2 **HOURS, 46 MINUTES**
The average amount of time we're online every day

smart strategies for making your tech work in ways that keep your brain focused—and even more efficient.

1 Sidestep the Time-Suck

Need to get some work done, but finding it hard to resist the lure of Facebook? So-called “productivity tools” can stop you from surfing when you can’t stop yourself. LeechBlock, a free add-on for Firefox, lets you block sites of your choosing during certain times of the day or after you’ve already wasted a set amount of time on them; Freedom, a \$10 download for PC and Mac users, blocks your Internet access for up to eight hours. Even simpler: Set a timer for 25 minutes of focused work. When it goes off, you get five minutes to check Twitter or your favorite blog.

2 Manage Your Email Better

Email has morphed into a continuous form of communication—more like a phone call than an

electronic letter—and, says Dr. Hallowell, you have to set boundaries. “You can’t think and email at the same time,” he says. To make that stream of messages less intrusive, designate specific times when you’ll read what’s in your inbox—say, every hour on the hour—instead of compulsively checking. To make this easier, change the settings on your email program so a pop-up doesn’t alert you to each new message. And if you read business email after work or on the weekend, avoid hitting “reply” if you don’t have to, since the more messages you send out, the more you get back.

3 De-Tech Your Bedroom

It’s tempting to cozy up with your Kindle Fire or iPad as you drift off to dreamland, but researchers say we should turn off TVs, laptops, and backlit tablets an hour before bed, since exposing yourself to light-emitting gadgets at night suppresses your body’s production of the sleep-

inducing hormone melatonin. That makes it harder to get your zzz's, leaving you less than sharp the next day. Same goes for people calling and texting you in the middle of the night. Ask your friends and family to resist contacting you after a certain hour unless it's an emergency, silence your email and text alerts, and put the phone out of arm's reach—under the bed or upside-down on the dresser—so it's not glowing in your face all night but you can still hear it if it rings. Checking your phone the minute your eyes open in the a.m. also sets a frazzled tone for the day, so try to resist reaching for it first thing.

4

Ease Into Gadget-Free Time

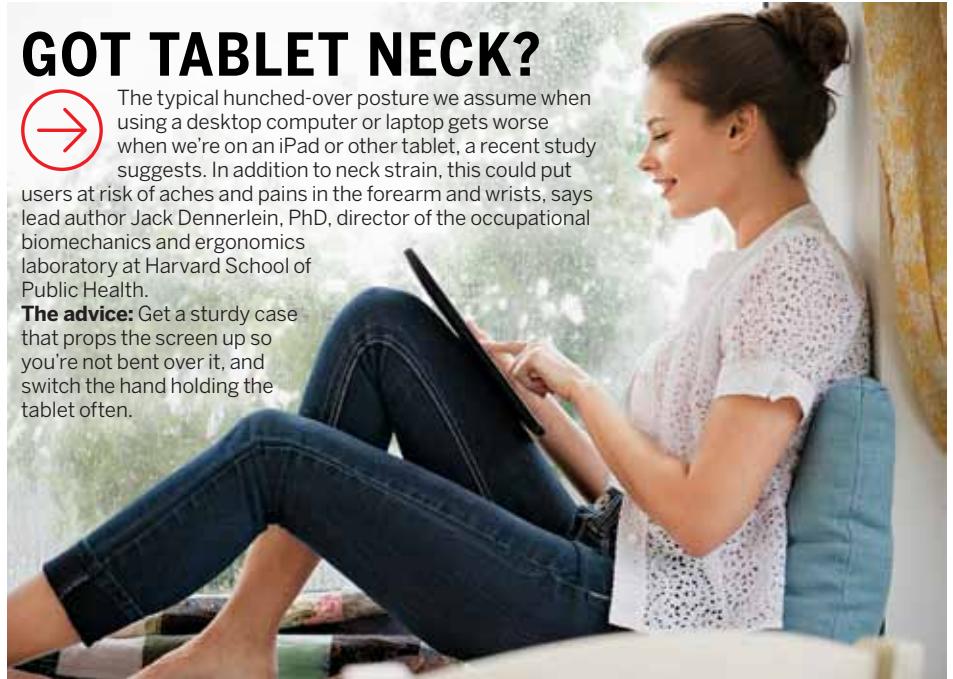
“People now pull out their BlackBerry instead of daydreaming or reading,” Dr. Hallowell points out. “There’s little time where you’re awake with yourself and thinking, pondering life.” So try to cut back on tech—but note that “you will have ‘withdrawal,’” warns Marsha Lucas, PhD, a neuropsychologist in Washington, D.C. “Your nervous system has gotten reset to having a lot of stimulation, and you have to recalibrate so that less feels good again.” Baby steps first: Try leaving the cell in the car while you hit the gym or the store, and then work up to running errands sans phone. It won’t kill you to be inaccessible for an hour or two, and you may just

GOT TABLET NECK?



The typical hunched-over posture we assume when using a desktop computer or laptop gets worse when we're on an iPad or other tablet, a recent study suggests. In addition to neck strain, this could put users at risk of aches and pains in the forearm and wrists, says lead author Jack Dennerlein, PhD, director of the occupational biomechanics and ergonomics laboratory at Harvard School of Public Health.

The advice: Get a sturdy case that props the screen up so you're not bent over it, and switch the hand holding the tablet often.



accomplish those tasks faster without the constant ping-pong. If you get work calls and emails at night that you have trouble ignoring, create “free times” where you don’t check them. To avoid feeling like you’re leaving correspondents in the lurch, set an out-of-office message: “I will be unreachable from 6–9 p.m.” This way, you’ll get space to develop ideas you might never have had while buried in your computer.

At the very least, clear your head by getting outside for a few minutes, since research shows that being in nature is the most powerful antidote to the drain of technology. One study found that even having a plant at your desk increases attention so you can do better work.

5

Keep a Quiet Car

Staying off your phone while driving is a no-brainer: Studies show that texting and talking in the car—even

hands free—could be as dangerous as driving drunk. But some tech actually helps us pay attention on the road, says University of Kansas psychologist Paul Atchley, PhD. Listening to a GPS system is safer than looking down at a map, and backseat DVD players keep kids from distracting you. Just program the GPS and start the DVD before you hit the road. Then enjoy the ride, free of rings and beeps (at least the kind inside your car). 📞



ATTENTION, BOSSES!

In 2011, after a Volkswagen union in Germany complained that after-hours emails were hurting employees' work-life balance, the company turned off BlackBerry email servers for nearly 1,200 workers 30 minutes after quitting time. (No such luck for their managers, though.)