

# Sonoma Health

2024

## Get the Sleep You Need

A good night's sleep can improve both mental and physical health

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# DIGITAL DETOX

*A Resolution for the Whole Family*

By Rachel Friedman, MD



**IN TODAY'S WORLD**, screens have woven their way into nearly every aspect of our lives. They connect us to each other, entertain us and feed us an increasing proportion of the information and news we consume. Many adults must use a screen — computer, tablet or phone — to perform their jobs; many schools now require screens for curricular content and homework. While there are certainly numerous benefits to our digital, hyperconnected world, excessive screen time has its drawbacks. A digital detox (in some form) may be the best thing you can do for your own — or your family's — mental and emotional health.

### THE PANDEMIC'S DIGITAL TSUNAMI

When COVID-19 swept across the globe in 2020, the digital world became our primary social outlet, and nearly every industry pivoted to a virtual or digital version. As a family physician, I switched almost entirely to telehealth encounters by day, and plunged into social media platforms every evening to communicate with colleagues worldwide, keep up with the latest research, share public health advisories and try to provide objective, thoughtful answers amid a sea of misinformation. Screens made it possible for our communities to continue to access health care safely and for physicians to collaborate across the globe.

Children also benefited. When schools closed and even playdates felt dangerous, virtual classes let learning continue as digital spaces turned into a new academic reality for our students. Grandparents read books to their grandchildren via video chat, and screen time activities let both children and teens stay socially connected. It shouldn't be surprising, then, that children's average daily screen time increased to almost six hours per day during the pandemic, and teens' use doubled to more than eight hours per day.

### THE DIGITAL BURNOUT

As the initial shock of the pandemic waned, the toll of this digital immersion became glaringly apparent to me. Emotional burnout set in, and everyone in our house seemed more irritable. My sleep cycles felt off, even though I was less stressed than I had been in previous years. The constant barrage of notifications, messages and updates left me mentally exhausted. I felt I had less bandwidth to be patient with my kids after a long workday, and they also seemed to be increasingly whiny, moody and intolerant of frustration or boredom. The lines between work, leisure and personal space had blurred, leaving us overwhelmed and hoping for an escape from the fray. Life was starting to return to normal, so why were we all so unhappy?

Our experiences mirrored what research suggests: excessive screen time can lead to sleep disturbances, increased stress and mental health challenges for both children and adults. It's been linked to increased risk of obesity and reduced cognitive development among children. In adults, too much screen time can independently create symptoms of anxiety and depression.

### A PHYSICIAN'S PERSONAL DETOX JOURNEY

Amid escalating arguments over screen time and its conspicuous effects on my children's behavior, my family embarked on a journey to break the habit. We started a few weeks before the end of summer vacation with the announcement that once school started, we would be undergoing a "digital detox."

## EXCESSIVE SCREEN TIME CAN LEAD TO SLEEP DISTURBANCES, INCREASED STRESS AND MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES FOR BOTH CHILDREN AND ADULTS.

The "weaning" period involved a gradual increase in time and media type restrictions. First, we created a limited list of shows/apps the children could engage with, then gradually restricted even that screen time to weekends only. Finally, we put away all



### RECOMMENDED READING

• **Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World** by Cal Newport

• **Digital Detox: The Two-Week Reset for Kids** by Molly Frank

### RECOMMENDED WATCHING

- Screened Out
- Screenagers

handheld devices and TV remotes so that their only screen time was through the shared experience of family shows or movies.

By the time the first day of school arrived, they had gotten used to these changes, and we were able to start the school year with a complete digital detox for the kids. Fortunately, at that time they were both at schools that did not require any media use at school or for homework. As a physician who must have phone and laptop connectivity for work, my adult version of detox involved a complete break from all social media and online news.

Even with the gradual transition, the first few weeks of our digital detox were challenging, highlighting the depth of our screen attachment. However, once we got through the initial induction period, I was pleasantly surprised to notice my children becoming more engaged, creative and curious.

Without the default turn to social media and doomscrolling before bed, I found myself reaching out to more friends and family individually, started an artistic hobby and was able to truly experience birthday parties and hikes without the mental strategizing of what and when to post. Our family bond strengthened as we rediscovered joys in simple, screen-free activities and leisure without entertainment. *Continued on page 27*



# A MODERN THREAT

## The impact of cyberbullying on the mental health of children

By Dr. Anish Shah, MD;  
Navyaa Sharma and Siya Shah

**THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA** over the past two decades has made it easier than ever to keep in contact with friends, loved ones and acquaintances. However, the past few years have made it increasingly obvious that there are darker sides to the ubiquity of social media platforms. Unfortunately, children and teenagers have faced the brunt of cyber abuse, with disastrous consequences for their mental health.

Cyberbullying is a form of repeated, intentional, aggressive behavior, including hateful text messages and harassment in public or via YouTube or TikTok videos. It often comes in the form of private tormenting or escalates to near-inescapable public humiliation. Worse yet, cyberbullying is experienced at all hours of the day and often at the hands of someone the victim knows.

Up to 58% of teens and children report being victims of some form of cyberbullying, and the situation is even more dire for children from marginalized communities — up to 71% of LGBTQ youth have been victims. In addition, those with preexisting mental health issues are more likely to be targeted.

Victims experience symptoms of depression and anxiety and tend to have lower grades than their peers, low self-esteem, poor quality of life, often turn to substance abuse and experience social ostracization. Its impact is associated with higher rates of suicidal thoughts or actions.

The situation worsened during the pandemic, with increased time spent online and increased social isolation. Teens who engage in cyberbullying are also worse off for it. Many people who engage in cyberbullying are also victims of it.

Consider the very public case of Conrad Roy III, who, in 2014, tragically took his own life after being bullied by his then-girlfriend, Michelle Carter. After weeks of constant text messages telling him he should kill himself and that he didn't deserve to live, Roy committed suicide. Carter was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter and sent to prison.

### TAKE ACTION

Research indicates that social support is linked to reduced symptoms of depression

and anxiety for victims of cyberbullying and bully-victims alike. Family support is also tied to improved overall wellbeing. By identifying likely victims of cyberbullying, family, friends and school officials can work together to provide needed support.

Signs of cyberbullying vary, but if parents observe that their child is emotionally upset after using the internet, spending more time than usual in isolation or appears withdrawn, they should pay close attention. Additionally, if a child suddenly stops using the computer or device and seems startled when getting incoming messages, text or emails, there could be a problem. When parents observe that their children avoid discussions about social media and phone activities, this behavior can also be a sign.

Similarly, families must be aware of their children's online activities to stop them from perpetrating cyberbullying and help address their underlying issues. With this two-pronged approach, we can fight back against cyberbullying and protect the mental health of children and teens — and the adults they grow into.

## THE WAY FORWARD

In an ideal world, we might have continued the digital detox forever, but a return to screens at home eventually occurred. We have reintegrated some weekend screen time and family movie nights back in for the kids, but we now have a tool for rejuvenation and reconnection when screen time saturation creeps back in. Our version of a mini detox usually involves a return to either weekend-only screen time or weekends plus family shows/movies. One to two weeks of this helps our brains and bodies reset, while reminding us that there are so many things to do in the world that don't involve an app or a screen.

Research affirms that embracing digital minimalism doesn't necessitate a complete severance from screens, but rather a more intentional and balanced approach. Just reducing screen time, or taking periodic digital detoxes, can refresh the mind, improve sleep, enhance interpersonal relationships and even foster creativity. When screens are removed, our brains find much-needed respite, leading to improved concentration and better mental health. ■

## YOUR FAMILY DIGITAL DETOX GUIDE



### PLANNING FOR A DIGITAL DETOX

- **Set Clear Goals:** Define the Aim – whether reducing daily screen time or going completely screen-free for a week or two.
- **Inform and Involve Everyone:** This is a family journey. Discuss the reasons and benefits with everyone to ensure cooperation.
- **Prepare Screen-Free Activities:** Stock up on books, board games and outdoor activity equipment.

### IMPLEMENTING THE DETOX

- **Gradual Reduction:** If going cold turkey seems daunting, start by reducing daily screen time and progressively increase the off-screen intervals.
- **Set Designated Screen Times:** If complete elimination isn't possible, allocate specific times for necessary screen usage.
- **Stay Accountable:** Check in with family members about their experiences and feelings. Celebrate milestones together!

Improvement has been seen when anti-bullying messages are taught in school; there are clear benefits to encouraging responsible online behavior to children at younger ages. Established prevention programs have been helpful thus far. To protect future generations, it is critical to maintain anti-bullying programs and to continue to spread awareness about the disastrous effects of online abuse.

## BE PROACTIVE

Ideally, don't introduce phones into your child's life until somewhere between the middle to end of middle school. If that is just *not* possible, it's important — *at any age* — to stay alert when interacting online. Teach your children to not accept random friend requests, post personal information online or click random links sent from strangers. Use strong passwords on social media sites, and don't share passwords with people they don't trust.

When these precautions don't stop a cyberbully: act.

Among approximately 5,700 middle and high school students, nearly one-third stated that blocking the perpetrator works best. It's also highly effective to ignore cyberbullies and online trolls, since the majority of them thrive on reaction. In general, taking a "tech break" is also advised to calm one's mind and forget about cyberbullying. For most teenagers, however, this is easier said than done.

If the bullying continues, contacting law enforcement is highly recommended. An incident can be addressed by federal law, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 or Education Amendments of 1972. Criminal law can be applied to most issues concerning stalking, coercion, sexually explicit images, etc.

With cyberbullying on the rise, it's important for social media companies to take responsibility and implement stronger age verification measures. In an ideal world, this tool would most effectively protect teenagers from becoming future victims or perpetrators of cyberbullying. ■

## Safe School Ambassadors

The Safe School Ambassadors Program (SSA) is an evidence-based program that harnesses the power of students to prevent and stop bullying and mistreatment. SSA is a student-centered model that educates diverse social leaders with the skills to prevent and reduce bullying. It is the nation's most effective student-led bullying prevention program. The SSA Program is currently active in at least 28 Sonoma County schools, across 11 districts. Since 2010, 64 schools in 21 districts in the county have implemented the program.

To learn more, visit [Safe School Ambassadors® Community Matters](#).