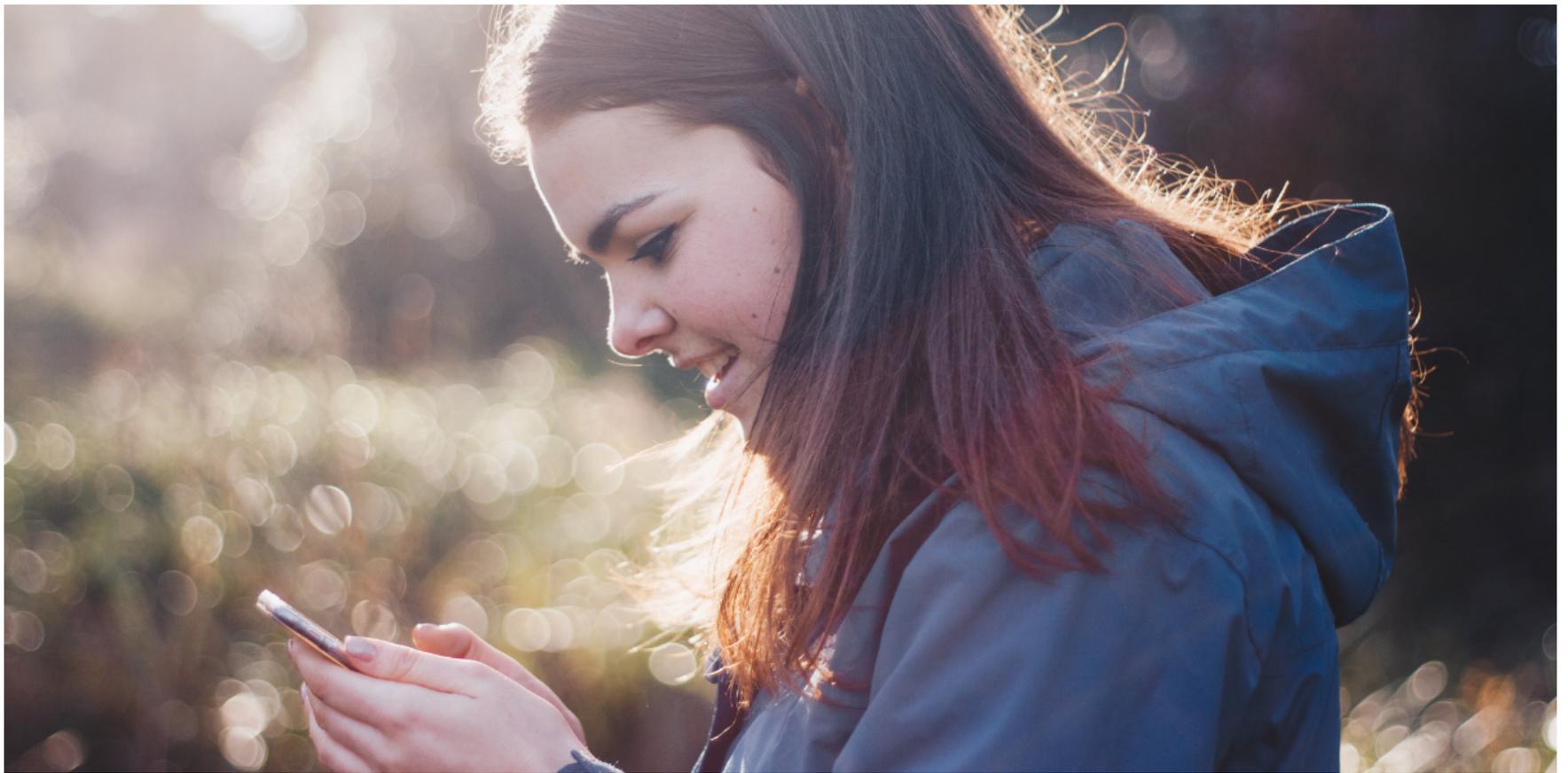


# Addicted to Technology? How to Stop Panicking and Create Healthy Solutions

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## The struggle with technology

*My work around mindful technology use* started because I keep finding myself in conversations with students, parents, and teachers about the ways they are struggling with technology. A fourth grader describes how he gets into a rage when he plays video games. In a room full of middle schoolers, every single student raises a hand when I ask if they've ever been stressed out by social media. High school students sheepishly admit that they are up past midnight scrolling away, mindlessly, on their phones. Parents and teachers (myself included) frequently relate that they are troubled by their own compulsive checking of their phones, in addition to their concerns about the

young people in their care.

*American teenagers average about **nine hours a day** of entertainment media use, excluding time spent at school or for homework.*

Given the incredible pull and deep impact technology has on us as adult users, it is no surprise that many young people are struggling to create a healthy relationship with their screens. According to a [Common Sense Media report](#), teens spend an average of nine hours a day on digital technology, *excluding work for school*. Because screens are ubiquitous, it is rarely an option to cut them out completely, so we must learn to engage with them in a healthy way. If not, we jeopardize our well-being.

## **How excessive screen use impacts mental health and learning**

Mental Health: There has been a marked decline in teen mental health and markers of well-being, with recent spikes in depressive episodes and suicide attempts. This decline has mirrored the peak use of smartphones, and it would be foolish of us to discount the correlation between these two trends, according to SDSU Professor Jean Twenge, author of *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy — and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood — and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. Even in younger people, Victoria Dunkley MD coined the phrase “Electronic Screen Syndrome” to describe the myriad of symptoms she has seen in her patients stemming from excessive screen use, in which young people are dysregulated, manifesting as mood disorders and hyper-aroused states.

*Despite being ever-connected, young people are reporting that they are lonely.*



Despite being ever-connected, young people are reporting that they are lonely. According to Twenge, they spend less face-to-face time with friends and more time interacting through social media. Furthermore, the connection they feel when together may be compromised. A [recent study](#) suggests that even when a phone is present and not in use, conversations between two people are rated as less meaningful and people feel a weaker sense of connection with the other person. Sherry Turkle, psychologist and professor at MIT, has [written extensively](#) about how we need the messy reality of an unedited face-to-face conversation and time alone in order to feel connection AND know ourselves, and thus experience happiness. Constant access to technology intrudes both on conversation and alone time, making this more difficult to access.

*Using the internet weakens our capacity for the kind of deep processing that underpins mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, reflection.*

Learning: Our technology habits both directly and indirectly impact our ability to learn. A recent study published in the [Lancet Child & Adolescent Health](#) suggests that when children, ages 8-11, have screen time limited to under 2 hours a day (as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics), they perform better on cognitive tests. The cursory reading habits and distractibility that we reinforce through constant technology use impair our ability to think deeply. When we multitask—like having our

phones out while we do homework— we can't store away information from our short term memory into long term memory. Our brains need downtime for higher order thinking. In *The Shallows: What the Internet is doing to our Brains*, Nicholas Carr writes that using the internet, “weakens our capacity for the kind of ‘deep processing’ that underpins ‘mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, reflection.” We are losing our critical thinking skills in this new age of rapid, constant information exchange.

## **But what do we DO???**

*If reading this has caused you to despair, fear not.* When we shine the light of attention on our habits of technology use, we can start to see more clearly how it affects us and make healthy choices. While screen time often takes us out of our bodies and disconnects us from our realtime lived experience, mindfulness can help bring us back online...to ourselves. Here are five ideas to get started on being intentional with screen time and encouraging the young people in your life to do the same.

Five ideas to cultivate a healthy screen diet:

1. Be intentional. Decide what you want to do before you are on your technology. Maybe even write it down and check it off as you accomplish each task. Set a timer. Research shows it is best to take at least a two minute break after every twenty minutes of screen time to move and stretch your body. Model this for your students.
2. Talk to kids about the impact of technology use. Ask them what they love about it and what they hate about it. Share your own struggles. Explain what you know about how impacts all of us. Adolescents are especially compelled by the idea that they are being intentionally manipulated. Consider sharing Tristan Harris' TedTalk, [“How a handful of tech companies control billions of minds every day”](#) or the revealing and poetic [“This Panda is Dancing”](#) video by Time Well Spent.

3. Create screen-free spaces and times. Carve out times in your life where there is an expectation of phones away. At home, this could be at the dinner table and in bedrooms. At school, if phones are allowed, you could choose times during class to have them away. Consider participating in a [screen free week](#).
4. Put your phone away when having a conversation with young people and encourage them to do the same. Explain why you value full attention and how it affects you. Young people all have stories about how it felt to have someone ignore them or divide their attention with their phone, so it can be helpful to evoke that experience.
5. Observe the impact on your thoughts and emotions. Try this short exercise, modeled on [David Levy's cell phone exercise](#) to notice the impact of using your screen:
  - *Take out your phone and hold it in your hand without turning on the screen. Notice if there are any particular thoughts or feelings. Is there*

*anything specific you want to do immediately?*

- *Now, turn the phone on and unlock. What do you see? Again, pause here and notice how you feel now. Is there a draw to something in particular? What does that feel like in the body? What does it feel like to wait?*
- *Proceed to the social media or email app of your choosing. Open it up and see how the mind and body to the content.*
- *Set a timer to check in five minutes. When the timer goes off, again notice the thoughts and sensations in the body.*

Just as we must have an understanding of mindfulness ourselves before trying to teach it to others, so must we cultivate our own relationship with technology before supporting our students. I have found they are much more open to thinking about it with us if we are willing to own our own struggles. Setting yourself up as an ally in this work can go a long way.

For more resources, check out:

[Wise Minds. Big Hearts. Mindful Technology Use Resource List](#)



*Erica Marcus, MAT and [Certified](#) Mindful Schools Instructor, founded [Wise Minds. Big Hearts.](#) to bring mindfulness to students, families, and schools in New England. In addition to her Mindful Schools coursework, Erica obtained her Kripalu Yoga Teacher Training in 2010 and has trained in Trauma-informed care. She also recently published a book called [Daily Mindful](#)*

*[Minis: Tiny mindfulness practices for the fourth trimester](#) based on her own recent experience with new motherhood.*

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