

The Detox Dilemma: How to “break up” with your phone and improve your mental wellbeing

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Digital detoxes are often proposed as a way to ‘break up’ with your phone. Despite their popularity, their effectiveness could be debated. While too much screen time can affect sleep, focus, and mental wellbeing (ref - calm), what you replace that time with may be equally important.

For example, one study mentioned in an article by Ness Labs found that people who actively engage in social media (posting, messaging, interacting) had poorer mental health during the social media break. The reason? They failed to replace their digital socialisation with in-person interactions.

Even with this in mind, changing your habits can be difficult. Often, going on our phones feels like the easiest way to relax after a tiring day on campus, with alternatives seeming like too much effort. However, moving from one screen in the library to another at home rarely gives your brain the rest it needs. If you feel the way you currently use your devices is leading to negative outcomes on your mental or physical health, it may be time to re-evaluate it.

Examine Your Behaviour

Start by considering what you currently use your devices for during free time (e.g. socialising, decompression, news).

Ask yourself:

- Do the apps you use to fulfil those purposes work well?
- What are the positives and negatives associated with using your phone to do this task?

Write these answers down; even a brief note can be helpful. As suggested by *Ness Labs*, journaling increases awareness of your digital habits and clarifies what you want from your time online.

Alternative activities

Socialising

For people who use social media to message people and inevitably start scrolling, apps like Beepr aggregate chats from Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp and more so you can talk without the feeds. Beyond mainstream apps, there are many smaller online communities for specific interests which can offer meaningful interaction without the endless feeds of visual content.

To incorporate more in-person interaction with friends, try arranging lunch on campus or coordinating mundane tasks like grocery shopping, making dinner or studying. If meeting in person is not possible, video calls while doing routine tasks can still foster connection.

Building relationships with the people in your local community, at the shops, or your next-door neighbour. Small social interactions like this are also good. Look out for community-run events, hosted by Imperial or in your area, such as live music, craft workshops, or board game cafes. Council websites, Eventbrite, and Dice are good places to start.

Entertainment and Decompression

Transitioning from a chaotic campus environment to a more restful state can be challenging, which is where mindful, hands-on activities can help.

Creative crafts are a good way to enter a 'flow' state. To avoid overconsumption, try to repurpose materials or purchase supplies second hand. Imperial has a range of societies such as Art Club (painting, sculpture, jewellery making) and KnitSoc (knitting and crochet) that only require a membership fee to use or borrow tools.

If you'd prefer something more physical, consider getting out into nature. The Imperial Chaplaincy Garden and the Secret Garden both host weekly sessions, with hands-on activities like planting cuttings and even taking home your own houseplant. You might also explore nature and ecology walks, run by student groups such as the Botanical Society and groups beyond campus.

For a different kind of digital experience, you could explore the 'indie-web'. Platforms like Neocities can be used to create your own website. There are many tutorials to help with this and community-designed sites that already exist (a nice example is <https://ribo.zone/>).

Study Breaks

Giving your eyes and brain a chance to reset during studying is vital.

Instead of switching to another screen, try listening to a podcast or music while going on a walk. Spending time outside, whether it's just a lap of the building or going to a green space, can be particularly refreshing.

Talking to a friend, even briefly, can be a useful reset. For more structured ideas, check out Purdue Global's guide: ["12 Study Break Ideas to Refresh Your Mind."](#)

News

Social media can be somewhat of a double-edged sword when it comes to news. While it often makes it easier to follow current events with more nuance than mainstream sources, it can end up inundating your feed and become overwhelming.

An alternative approach might involve having a set time of day to look at news. News outlets such as Al Jazeera and BBC have short podcasts that are released daily. Looking at longer-form analysis of news topics that are important to you less frequently may also be helpful, providing deeper insight without the intensity of constant updates.

Conclusion

Rather than aiming for a complete digital detox, focus on finding a balance that works for you. Identify which habits need replacing the most and work from there.

Be patient with yourself. It is important to recognise that technology is a useful tool at times and distracting or even harmful at others. The goal is not to eliminate it from your leisure time altogether, but to use it in a way that supports your wellbeing.

References/Resources

[8 signs you need a digital detox \(and how to try it\) — Calm Blog](#)

[Digital detoxes don't actually work - Ness Labs](#)

[12 Study Break Ideas to Refresh Your Mind | Purdue Global](#)

[Anti-Burnout Craft Ideas - Kathleen Illustrated](#) - intuitive and low entry cost craft ideas

[You Can Make A Website](#) – A guide on how to create a website covering design, content, and publishing