THE DEBATE OVER TECH ADDICTION

IF YOU'RE ALWAYS ON A DEVICE, ARE YOU HOOKED ON TECH OR MERELY PRONE TO DISTRACTION?

By Davia Sills

Many people turn to technology to meet their everyday needs. If they're bored, they stream a movie. If they're hungry, they order food on their favorite delivery app. If they need directions, they pull up Google Maps. They rely on technology to complete their work more quickly and efficiently, and then they stay plugged in during their off-hours for gaming and other forms of entertainment. But does that make them addicted to their devices?

The question of addiction to social media, online gaming and other internet-based activities has stirred up its fair share of controversy. On the one hand, research shows a biological and physiological component to tech use, particularly when it's excessive. Psychologist Doreen Dodgen-Magee, PsyD, author of *Deviced! Balancing Life and Technology in a Digital World,* describes changes in the brain's neurotransmitters and the body's hormones. "We know that dopamine levels rise. We know that there's involvement in the endocrine system. We know that over time, the same amount of stimulation

The internet offers access to people, cultures and ideas we couldn't otherwise tap. A robust digital life can widen our world, but too much might limit our vision.

in tech becomes less fulfilling. So we need more to reach the high that we would have reached at lower levels before," she says.

Since these same characteristics can be found in diagnosable addictions, such as alcohol or drugs, Dodgen-Magee believes that technology certainly has addictive qualities. She and experts who share her view hold that while not everyone who overuses technology is an "addict," the language of addiction can prove handy in recognizing when tech use has become a problem. Understanding addiction, they say, can help us address overuse of tech before it wreaks havoc on a person's life.
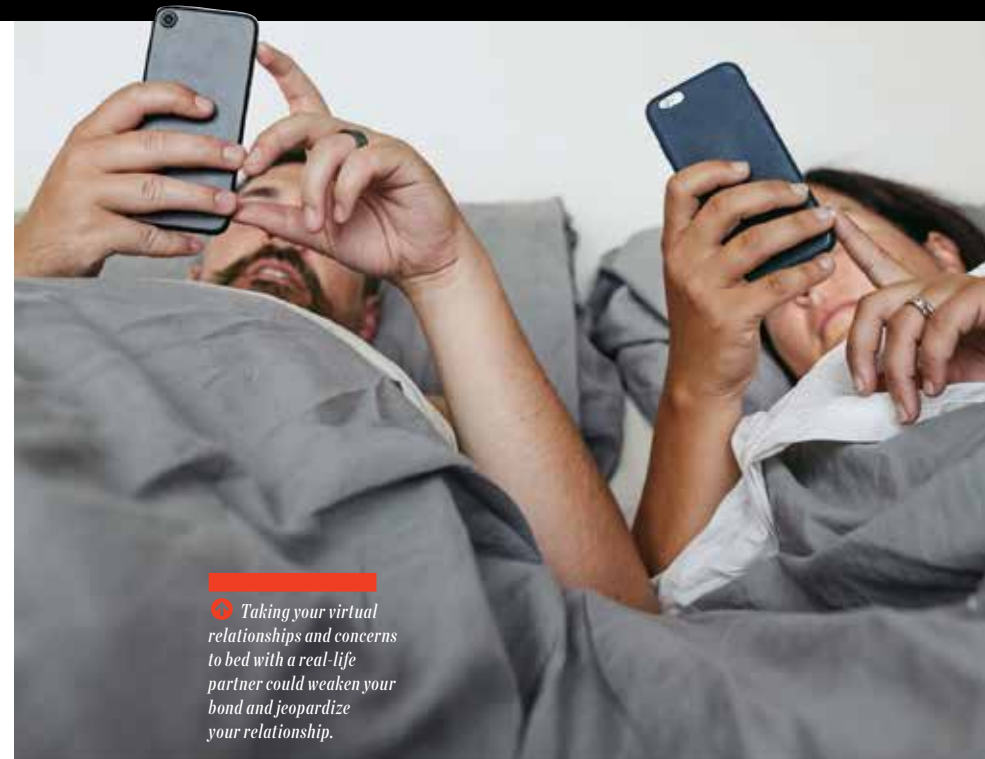
On the other side of the coin are experts worried about pathologizing

normal digital behavior by labeling it a mental illness. "Using your phone to check social media and injecting heroin are two very, very different activities," says psychologist Jesper Aagaard, PhD, from Aarhus University in Denmark. "And you're doing a grave disservice to both heroin addicts and phone users by comparing them."

Warning Signs

Aagaard prefers to look at heavy technology use—or, as he calls it, "digital distraction"—as a problem that affects society as a whole. While he agrees that a select few individuals may be genuinely addicted to their devices, he observes that the vast majority of people simply have bad tech habits.

IGNORING DINNER COMPANIONS TO TEXT FRIENDS LEADS TO FEELINGS OF **DISCONNECTION.**

Taking your virtual relationships and concerns to bed with a real-life partner could weaken your bond and jeopardize your relationship.

More than 166 million Americans regularly play video games, but for some the effect on their brains turns it from a passion into something more like an addiction.

READY PLAYER ADDICT
➤ *Why internet gaming can be a losing game.*

The online gaming industry is booming. More than 3.5 billion people around the world play video games on their smartphones every month, according to the Digital 2020 Global Overview Report. Gamers often find a community of like-minded people who share their interests, triggering a hormone release that induces satisfaction during play.

But the stimulation of a game can be addictive, prompting a rush of dopamine. Playing the game creates a "dysregulated state," according to psychologist Doreen Dodgen-Magee, which can only be calmed through the "fast-paced decision-making" the gamer gets by playing further. Thus, a toxic cycle is born.

A small but significant minority of internet gamers behave like addicts who need their game fix. Psychologist Jesper Aagaard describes the impairment gamers face, which proves eerily similar to an addiction: "It kind of takes over their lives, and everything else kind of falls apart."

And whether it's recognized as an addiction or not, heavy tech use can be detrimental. It can impair a person's focus, resulting in poor performance at work or in school. "Feeling anxious when we don't have access to our technology is a warning sign," says Dodgen-Magee. In her experience, some other red flags include deliberate isolation specifically to use tech; the inability to regulate emotion without the help of a device; or a problem communicating without technology.

Aagaard says overuse sets in when people use tech in unthinking ways that distract them from what they need to do. The habit known as "phubbing," for instance, involves snubbing another person in order to pay attention to a mobile phone during what should be a meaningful interaction.

Of course, the digital world has a lot to offer. The internet provides a wealth of information and can encourage critical thinking. Dodgen-Magee adds, "It gives us opportunity for relationship development and maintenance in a way we wouldn't normally have," especially during the current pandemic. On the dark side, it can feed digital dependency.

Certain types of content are potentially more dangerous and addictive than others. The big three, Dodgen-Magee says, are violence, sexual content (See "Addicted to Sin?" page 64) and advertisements. Violence and sexualized content create "a kind of obsessive thinking that people may then quell with compulsive use," Dodgen-Magee asserts, which often means consuming more of the same. Online advertising has been designed by marketing teams to specifically target people's vulnerabilities and encourage dependency. It's highly effective when it comes to its primary objective: prompting specific actions.

In short, experts don't agree on whether it's possible to be addicted to technology. While the World Health Organization (WHO) has included internet gaming as a diagnosable addiction in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) and is considering the addition of a general technology addiction, there's no equivalent in the U.S. in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM–5). For now, receiving an official diagnosis depends on where you live, but that shouldn't stop you from seeking needed help.

HOW TO BREAK THE HABIT
➤ *Ways to cope with digital dependency.*

Wasting time on social media instead of completing an urgent project? Gaming endlessly on the phone instead of being present with friends and family? Compulsively shopping online for hours instead of doing chores around the house? The opportunities for digital distraction abound. Here are a few ways to break those bad habits and start using technology more responsibly.

EMBRACE BEING UNCOMFORTABLE, INCONVENIENCED AND BORED. *Psychologist Doreen Dodgen-Magee declares, "Ten minutes a day of meditation, or what I'm calling boredom practice, can actually rewire... the parts of the brain that are pruned off with overstimulation of tech."*

AVOID THE "CONSCIOUSNESS LAG" IN ORDER TO MAKE ACTIVE CHOICES ABOUT WHEN AND HOW TO USE TECHNOLOGY. *Often, people reach for a device automatically, and then there's a lag of a few minutes before "you become aware of what you're doing, and then you shut it down," says Dr. Jesper Aagaard. To prevent the consciousness lag, put technology out of sight, close that computer or turn on airplane mode on that smartphone. When it takes someone longer to access technology they're used to having right at their fingertips, they become more aware of what they're doing and thus can make better decisions about their tech use.*

BE PHYSICALLY PRESENT AND HAVE SENSORY EXPERIENCES. *"I try to encourage people to develop that habit by putting things all around their environment that are kind of sensory and embodied," says Dodgen-Magee. "So bowls of kinetic sand, stacks of origami paper, an Etch A Sketch, those little silver meditation balls that you can roll in your hand.... Something that can just kind of keep your hands busy while you're trying to quiet your mind can be helpful."*