

A Step-by-Step Guide to Overcoming

*Digital Overwhelm*



*by Sandra Pawula*

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# *Digital Overwhelm*

**If you feel like you can't escape the internet or your digital devices, you are not alone. This simple e-book will show you the way to reclaim your sanity and rediscover digital freedom.**

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# Can't Resist the Digital Call?

Social media fatigue! Social network fatigue! Tech overload! Digital toxicity!

Whatever you call it, a new dis-ease is cropping up all over cyberspace. Do you feel you can't resist the call of digital technology?

## **You are not alone!**

In fact, our growing dependence on digital media is frightening.

The desperation we feel when disconnected is poignantly illustrated by the response of university students around the world – 1,000 in total - to the experience of going just 24 hours without media. This incisive study – conducted by the *International Center for Media & the Public Affairs* (ICMPA) in partnership with the *Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change* – reports:

*“Students around the world repeatedly used the term ‘addiction’ to speak about their dependence on media.*

*“Media is my drug; without it I was lost,” said one student from the UK. “I am an addict. How could I survive 24 hours without it?” Sharing analogies and metaphors made explicit the depths of their distress and likened their reactions to feelings of a drug withdrawal. As a student from the USA noted: “I was itching, like a crackhead, because I could not use my phone.”*

*A student from Argentina observed: “Sometimes I felt ‘dead,’”*

*and a student from Slovakia simply noted: “I felt sad, lonely and depressed.”*

It appears that digital media is rewiring our brain for addiction, multiplying our need for external validation a thousand-fold, and creating a feeling of panic when faced with open, disconnected space.

### **Am I alone in thinking that all this is not a good thing?**

*“All man’s difficulties are caused by his inability to sit, quietly, in a room by himself.” – Blaise Pascal*

This brief e-book outlines easy methods you can use to realign your digital engagement and regain a sense of digital equilibrium. But first, a little more about the challenge and why it’s so difficult to disconnect for almost everyone, not just you.

# Mild to Moderate Digital Addiction: Might That Be You?

The internet itself is not inherently good or bad. You are not in the grasp of an evil monster viciously plotting ways to ruin the quality of your life.

But it sometimes feels that way, doesn't it? That's because, as the students aptly reported in the study mentioned above, there's an element of addiction when it comes to digital media of all sorts.

According to [Business Week](#),

*“Scrolling through e-mail and punching out text messages fire up the dopamine-reward system, unleashing a pleasure-inducing hit that for an estimated 6% of Internet users has become clinically addictive, says University of Michigan psychology professor David Meyer.”*

“Clinically addictive” means you have a serious problem. You are out of control and probably spend vast stretches of time plugged in. You probably need professional help.

## **But what about the rest of us with a mild to moderate level of addiction?**

Our brain-based reward systems are being fired-up too just not to the “clinical” extent. We still feel the impulse, the draw, the pull. We still spend more time than we actually intend to online. We can't quite fully

understand the irresistible urge or the way we seem to go unconscious and lose hours at a time. We may even feel embarrassed or guilty to acknowledge our mild (or moderate) digital obsession.

In addition to (or maybe because of firing up the brain's reward system), constant online engagement has the power to momentarily quell deep-seated feelings of loneliness, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and other pesky emotions. But this escapism from our fundamental discomforts only brings more suffering in the end.

Digital frenzy also feeds the minds deeply ingrained habit toward distraction, which takes us further and further away from our true self.

## **You *Can* Change Your Brain**

It's really important to know there's nothing fundamentally "wrong" with you if you have this mild to moderate digital addiction. This is just how the brain works, but you can change it.

Often, these types of impulses, addictions, and negative behaviors are the result of deceptive brain messages. By repeatedly responding to the impulse and engaging in the corresponding action, you strengthen the brain circuits that reinforce the deceptive message, causing you to be drawn to the same old unhealthy behaviors once again.

In other words, the very way the brain functions makes it difficult though not impossible to change deceptive brain messages and the harmful behaviors like digital obsession that ensue.

However, you *can* learn how to use your mind to veto deceptive brain messages, refocus your attention in positive ways, and work around the

untrue messages. One proven method for achieving this is explained in the book [\*You Are Not Your Brain\*](#), *The 4-Step Solution for Changing Bad Habits, Ending Unhealthy Thinking, and Taking Control of Your Life* by leading neurologists Jeffrey Schwartz, M. D. and Rebecca Gladding, M.D.

As you can see from the studies I cited, you are not alone. There's an epidemic of digital addiction occurring in our world today. It's this element of addiction that makes it so difficult to conquer digital impulses. Although you are up against some tough brain biology, it's more than possible to change.

Our digital challenge can make us feel frustrated, guilty, and angry at ourselves. But there's another way to look at the test. It's an excellent opportunity to get to know and master the habits of your mind. And that's how you can find freedom in the digital realm and every other arena of your life too. Following are the steps I took to reclaim my digital freedom.

# 8 Steps to Digital Balance

Now that we understand the global and addictive aspects of the problem, we can move into strategies for change.

**There is a one-word solution to digital overwhelm: limits.**

But we can only successfully honor the limits we set if we do our inner work first. My own personal journey to digital sanity began with a series of probing questions. I then moved on to a time review, a period of digital clean-up, and finally to planning, limit setting, and implementation.

These are the 8 steps I took to secure greater digital freedom. During the process, I identified social media as my key problem. Your challenge may be different, but these same principles can be adapted and applied to other forms of digital engagement.

## 1. Acknowledging the Problem

“Hello, my name is Sandra. I have a digital addiction.” Isn’t the first step always acknowledging the problem?

Ironically, these days people are inventing new words like “worlolidays” and “workation” to justify working during vacation. They even claim to love mixing work and holiday.

But that’s what addicts do, isn’t it? Justify, minimize, and make light of their addiction. Heck, they even encourage other people to give it a try. And addictions may not seem so bad in the beginning. But they do have

a tricky way of sneaking up on you.

Again, there's nothing inherently good or bad about taking your computer or smart phone on vacation. Sometimes, it might be the intelligent choice.

### **But *can* you leave it at home?**

Like the students in the study above, try unplugging for a day – just 24 hours - and see how it feels. Only you yourself can know whether there's an element of addiction to your online engagement.

There's no judgment intended. Each person has to decide for themselves if they are addicted and if it's time to break free.

## **2. What's Your Motivation?**

Now that you've acknowledged there's a problem and have decided to investigate and realign, it's time to ask penetrating questions.

Create some quiet space where you can sit comfortably and ask yourself the following questions about your basic motivation. These questions will help you get in touch with your original motivation for being online as well as the reasons why you would like to curtail your online activity.

Just take a few breaths, relax, and see what comes to mind. There are no wrong answers. It's OK to seek enjoyment or connection, for example.

We don't have to be serious or goal oriented all the time! The aim of this exercise is just to be conscious of our motivations. Being honest with yourself is key.

Spend 10, 15 or 30 minutes – as long as you need - with these questions. Chances are insights will continue to arise throughout the day. Keep a notebook handy so you can jot them down. You may want to revisit these questions a few days in a row.

- What's your motivation for being online (or connected)?
- What's your motivation for spending less time online (or connected)? What would you like to accomplish or experience instead?

You will probably have more than one answer. Some answers will be more important than others.

Knowing *why* we want to be online can help us keep focused on our true intention. Knowing *what* we want to do instead of being online can give us a positive vision. We can call up this positive vision as a way to intercede when impulses arise.

My original motivation for being online was to be of service. I wanted to curtail my online activity:

- To feel a sense of spaciousness in my mind and being rather than constantly stimulating the thinking part of my mind.
- To have more time for relaxation and nourishing activities.
- To have more time for meditation and personal study.
- To have more time for writing.

**What's your motivation? Why do you want to cutback?**

### 3. What's *Your* Challenge?

The following questions will help identify your specific challenges. They will tell you if there are deceptive brain messages running your show.

The first three were posed by **Gwen Bell** at a 2011 [BlogHer](#) workshop.

Again, create some quiet time, relax, take a few deep breaths. Then go for it:

- What [needs are you getting met online?](#)
- If I'm not online, I'm afraid I'll miss out on...
- The truth is...
- I go online to avoid...

By working with these questions myself, I realized it's not all about service. My needs for connection, intellectual stimulation, validation, appreciation, and support are also being met online.

Knowing this empowers me to consciously allocate time for these aspects of my digital involvement or to choose alternative ways to meet these needs. For example, I value my online friendships and my intention isn't to abandon them.

Having some of our needs met online is not a big problem unless we are wholly dependent on others to satisfy our needs. If we find we have become addicted to external validation - likes, pluses, comments, rising blog stats - we can take a step back and look at ways to take back the reigns and validate our self instead.

One of the most powerful practices for acknowledging yourself is the

practice of [loving kindness](#). [Meditation](#) is another way to make friends with your own mind and emotions and cut the over-attachment to external validation.

**“The truth is” turned out to be my favorite question.** The truth is I like Twitter the least. The truth is I have a mild digital addiction. The truth is I feel compelled to engage in social media to promote my blog. There were more personal truths to be heard. Allowing myself to hear my own truths helped tremendously to shape my digital realignment.

During this process, I discovered my problem isn't the time I spend writing blog posts or answering comments. I've already set [limits on my blogging activities](#). I don't get an overabundance of email nor do I possess the standard digital devices beyond my MacBook Pro. And, as shocking as it might seem, there's no cell phone coverage where I live!

My problem in a nutshell is the amount of time I spend - and waste - on social media.

What's yours?

#### **4. How Much Time Do You Spend Connected?**

Here's where the rubber really hits the road. Do you know how much time you spend online? Some of my friends say they are afraid to find out! Is that you too?

I used the [168 Hours Time Management Spreadsheet](#), recommended by **Gwen Bell**, to find out exactly how much time I spend online and in which activities.

You can download it for free as a PDF form or an Excel spreadsheet.

|       | MONDAY | TUESDAY | WEDNESDAY | THURSDAY | FRIDAY | SATURDAY | SUNDAY |
|-------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|
| 5AM   |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 5:30  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 6     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 6:30  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 7     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 7:30  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 8     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 8:30  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 9     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 9:30  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 10    |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 10:30 |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 11    |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 11:30 |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 12PM  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 12:30 |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 1     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 1:30  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 2     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 2:30  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 3     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 3:30  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 4     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 4:30  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 5     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 5:30  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 6     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 6:30  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 7     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 7:30  |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| -     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |

This is not an exercise in self-judgment. It's an exercise in clarity. As the saying goes, "the truth will set you free."

I tracked my time for two weeks. I found this exercise so illuminating that I decided to continue to track my time. I didn't keep track of *all* my life activities, although you can. I only tracked my online time. The more specific you are, the more valuable the information you receive.

Here are some basic categories you could track. Craft your own categories for the best information results.

- blog post writing
- blog post formatting
- responding to blog comments
- commenting on other blogs
- social media (or track twitter, Facebook, Google+, etc. separately)
- email
- sending text messages

It wasn't a pretty number...the time I spend on social media. I understand why some of you might be afraid to try this exercise. But honestly, it's empowering to know. The truth is that social media eats up time worse than a cookie monster. Getting conscious is the only way to get back control.

## **5. Clearing the Digital Clutter**

Digital clutter is another aspect of my personal digital overwhelm. I allow digital clutter to accumulate endlessly. I had more than 1,000 messages between my two email accounts. This caused me to waste time again and again searching for the pieces of information I really needed. Clutter drains your subtle energy too. Whereas, creating harmony in your digital environment can boost it.

### **E-mail**

I deleted or filed all 1,000 plus email messages. I created a new folder called "a reply needed". Nothing remains in the main in-box for more than a day. My new email routine is to respond, move the message into a folder, or delete it, leaving my inbox sparkling clean.

### **Desktop**

It's embarrassing to admit that my entire desktop was also cluttered with files and folders.

My streamline way to solve the problem was to create three new files on my desktop: personal, work, and blogging. I looked at each file and folder on the desktop, deleted it, or moved it into one of the three new homes. I also created a file called "writing in progress" that lives in my

blog folder. There's no way I could go through all the files and folders on my entire computer. That would take eons. But this new system has cleaned up my desktop and make it relatively easy to access what I need. I use the "search" feature to find the file I need.

The new look of my desktop:



## **Unfollow**

I also radically trimmed my "following" list on twitter from almost 500 to around 200. I want to follow those I engage and converse with, but not every single person trying to promote their product, service, or blog.

It took a good chunk of time to declutter, but not as long as I thought.

Now I have a clean slate. It feels great.

**Do you need to clean up your digital home?**

## 6. Employ Helpful Tech Tools and Services

Yes, as you have probably guessed, I'm tech adverse. I routinely avoid adopting new technology because I assume it will be too complicated. Clearly, this assumption has caused me a great deal of inefficiency. I took a leap and tried out a few new applications, which may be at the kindergarten level for some, but exceedingly useful for others.

### Google Reader

Kristi Hine's article [How I Organize Google Reader for Blog Commenting](#) turned me onto the idea of trying out Google reader.

A huge proportion of those 1,000 messages in my inbox were from blog subscriptions. I don't like to read blog posts in my inbox. So I would pop over to the blog and read the article, but never delete it from my email inbox.

Some people prefer email subscriptions, but with my digital clutter habit, they just don't work for me. As I deleted hundreds of email subscription articles from my inbox, I simultaneously unsubscribed from each email subscription and re-subscribed to the RSS feed in Google Reader.

Google Reader is a godsend in my eyes. I find it far more efficient. I use Google reader as my home base. It's the first place I visit when I start my digital day.

Using this system, my blog reading is organized by topic into folders. When a folder is clicked, all the articles pop up as a list. You can click a

title to see and read the full article in the reader. You are able to share some articles on social media directly from Google reader itself, depending on the particular blog. If this is not possible, I just pop over to the blog to comment or share. Then, with a click on the Google Reader tab, I'm back at home base ready to read the next article from the list.

## **Twitter Tools**

In her article, [Twitter Tips for Bloggers](#), **Annabel Candy** mentions both [TweetDeck](#) and [hootsuite](#) as tools that can help you manage your social media management.

I don't intend to automate all my tweets, but I tried out TweetDeck. The application allows me to tweet from my desktop, which saves time. It also makes it possible to schedule some tweets so I don't have to go back and forth to Twitter all day long. **Annabel Candy** prefers Hootsuite.

To explore more tech tools check out: [My 10 Top Tech Tools for Saving Time and Increasing Productivity](#) by **Tony Teegarden**.

**Are there any tools that might help you?**

## **7. Defining Goals and Setting Limits**

Now that you've done the inner work, defined the problem, and cleaned the slate, your goals have probably emerged naturally. I use the [SMART](#) format to express my goals in a way that will support their success.

The acronym means:

- S = specific
- M = measurable
- A = achievable
- R = realistic
- T = timebound

My inner work and time tracking showed my main problem as too much time on social media. So I reflected on how much I would like to disengage and created a reasonable strategy for accomplish the goal.

I created a **goal** to reduce my social media time by 42% by the end of a three month period.

My **strategy** was to limit my time on social media to four days a week. And, I won't increase my time on social media during my "on" days!

I decided to implement the strategy in phases by taking one day off the first month; another the second month; and all three the third month. I also decided to limit the number of hours I spend on social media on my active days.

You can set limits by quantity or by time. There are several different free online timers that will help you stay on track. I use [Tick Tock Timer](#).

Here's some examples of setting limits by quantity.

- Participating in one social media network instead of three.
- Writing two blog posts a week instead of three.
- Limiting your blog posts to 800 words or less.

It's was a pleasure to put this strategy of digital days off to work. On my first digital day off, I felt a little lost. "What will I do now?" I thought.

*I swept the floor.*

*I felt the edges of space.*

*I felt the emptiness between activity and possibility.*

*I felt what it was like to inhabit my body instead of my brain.*

*I let my energy and my focus slide into my heart.*

*I rediscovered writing by hand. And the pleasure of sinking into the flow of my words, writing in waves, and letting an essay gradually evolve over a whole week.*

Extra space may feels "odd" at first. The secret is not to frantically fill it all up again. Be selective about your priorities and leave some extra space to nourish yourself.

This approach taking full days off from social media may not work for you. You may feel you need a continuous presence. But you could reduce the amount of time you spend each day. The key is finding the goal and strategy that fits your personal vision of online balance.

**What are your goals? What is your strategy?**

## 8. Staying On Track

It's great to make promises, but sometimes harder to keep them. I feel the clarity I've gained going through the inner work is making it easier to stay on track. In fact, I feel less of a pull toward social media. But it still pops up.

It's essential to take some time to consider how you will stay on track with your strategy.

Mindfulness is the key to not going unconscious online. There are countless tools to help you practice mindfulness in relation to your digital life. I will continue charting my online time using the **168 Hours PDF** as one way to stay accountable to myself as well as an online timer.

**Gwen Bell** suggests using a totem when you go on and off-line as a way to keep in mind and acknowledge what you are doing. She uses a bell. Putting on and taking off a bracelet or taking a sip of tea are other ideas offered in her workshop. A timer is another premium tool.

I've read several positive reports about [Freedom](#), a simple productivity application for Mac or Windows that locks you out of the internet for up to eight hours at a time. That's a great option if you feel you need extra support.

Committing to an evaluation process — once a week or once a month, for example — is also an important element of achieving goals. It's the formal time you set aside to review whether you've made progress toward or achieved your goals. Or to discover that you may in fact need to shift your goals. We're not static beings. As we change, our goals will change

too. So it's always good to take another look.

**How will you stay mindful and on track?**

## **More Resources**

In addition to the resources already mentioned, the following pieces were especially helpful during my digital reassessment and realignment.

[Focus](#) by **Leo Babauta**

*“Focus is about finding simplicity in this Age of Distraction. It’s about finding the focus you need to create, to work on what’s important, to reflect, to find peace. And it comes in two flavors: free and premium.”*

*Focus* takes a more comprehensive look at altering your digital habits and provides an abundance of methods and strategies.

[Change Yourself I Unplug, UnFriend, Unfollow, Unwind: Is that](#)

[Sacrilege?](#) Live blog of **Gwen Bell**'s workshop at BlogHer '11 expands upon the questions and methods from Gwen that I shared here.

# Life is Short

That's been my journey to digital freedom. So far. I expect more will unfold and additional limits will be set. For example, I look forward to a longer digital sabbatical next summer and the possibility of taking shorter ones after Christmas and during Spring break.

Occasional lapses may also occur. The difference now is that I have the information, tools, and positive experience to redirect myself if I occasionally get off track.

When I look at the photo of the water lily at the beginning of this e-book juxtaposed with the words "digital overload", I feel a sense of cognitive and inner dissonance.

The image tells me so clearly that we weren't put on this planet to live in digital frenzy. It might even be an act of compassion to reduce the presence of our own voice amidst the digital din.

However, there's no need to reject the digital world and all its wonders. Let's just use it in a balanced and intelligent way.

Because life is short! There's no time to waste on the unimportant.

*"This existence of our is as transient as autumn clouds. To watch the birth and death of beings is like looking at the movements of a dance. A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky. Rushing by, like a torrent down a steep mountain."*

*-the Buddha*

If you feel like you have an addiction to the internet – however mild or significant it might be - I invite you to follow these steps to regain your peace and sanity. And I wish you the very best of success!

~

*If you found this free e-book helpful, please share it with your friends.*

~

*I invite you to visit my blog at [Always Well Within](#) where I write about personal transformation and occasionally delve into conscious blogging.*

*You can also connect with me on [Google+](#) or the [Always Well Within Facebook Page](#) ...but I won't be there all the time!*

## **Image Credits**

[Water Lily Image](#) // Desktop Wallpaper: [National Geographic](#)

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