DAILYGOOD
News that Inspires

How to Kick Your Digital Addiction and Learn to Live Again
by Kira M. Newman

Because 6 percent of U.S. workers checked their work email when they or their spouse were in labor.

Technology can bring happiness. Anyone who's found the perfect meditation app or downloaded a grandchild's photo won't doubt that.

But technology can also bring anxiety, stress, and frustration. And that seems to be a given, too, making us throw our hands in the air. We accept that technology will always be a mixed bag and we have to take the bad with the good.

"I worry that maybe our happiness is getting left behind."

According to Amy Blankson, author of the new book The Future of Happiness: 5 Modern Strategies for Balancing Productivity and Well-Being in the Digital Era, this attitude is a problem.

"As tech advances and we accept these changes without pause, I worry that maybe our happiness is getting left behind, moving further down the priority list," she writes.

Instead, she argues, we should take back control of our happiness by pausing, becoming more self-aware, and setting intentional goals for our technological interactions. That way, we'll cultivate more connection and productivity—and less stress and loneliness—in our digital lives.

Finding happiness in the digital world

No book on technology would be complete without citing some unsettling statistics: Young people spend an average of six or more hours a day on their phones, for example, and 50 percent of teens feel addicted to them. Six percent of U.S. employees checked their work email when they or their spouse were in labor!

The average American user turns their phone on 46 times per day, and only sometimes are we doing something useful: looking up a restaurant on Google Maps, for example, or setting an alarm. Other times, we're driven by a buzz, a ping, or just the illusion of one—and these interruptions are costly.

Research suggests that being distracted from a task (like, say, working) for just a minute can disrupt our short-term memory, causing us to forget whatever ideas or intentions we

had in mind. After a mere 2.8-second interruption (the time it might take to read a text message), we make twice as many errors on a complex task; after 4.4 seconds (the time it might take to write one), our errors triple.

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But Blankson also wants to tell the other side of the story. "I encourage you to avoid the road of the tech doomsday-sayers, because I don't see that it is truly possible for us to eliminate technology and I don't think we should have to eliminate technology to find happiness," she writes.

For example, most Internet users say email has improved their relationships with their family (55 percent) and their friends (66 percent). Half of us have met someone online that we later connected with in person, and 22 percent of people are married, engaged to, or living with someone they first encountered on the Internet (and those relationships aren't any less stable than the ones formed in the "real world").

According to a 2014 study, employees who sport wearable devices become 8.5 percent more productive and 3.5 percent more satisfied with their jobs—perhaps because they learn to move around more, improve their posture, and focus.

"Tech is not a toxin that we need to flush out of our systems—it's a tool," writes Blankson. "And it's a tool that we must learn to wield effectively."

How to use technology intentionally

Blankson's book is full of tips on how to capture more of the benefits and fewer of the drawbacks of technology, along with stories of her own triumphs and failures. What it boils down to is being deliberate with when, how, and why we use technology.

In one study, researchers instructed participants to either keep smartphone notifications on or turn them off for a full week. The ones hearing regular pings reported being more hyperactive and inattentive, which predicted lower productivity and well-being.

The lesson? Turn off all but the most crucial notifications, says Blankson. (I myself shut off the sound on most of my notifications long ago, allowing them to pop up silently, and that alone has made my days much more peaceful.)

People who check email less frequently become less stressed.

Blankson also recommends checking email, social media, and news just three times a day. She cites research suggesting that people who check email less frequently become less stressed, and (in turn) they experience better sleep, deeper social connection, and more meaning in life.

If the idea of disconnecting makes you feel uneasy, ask yourself why, Blankson advises. Maybe you fear the consequences if you don't—for your career or your personal life. Or maybe constant multitasking makes you feel busy and important. "Interruptions leave us feeling desired and needed, which can become intoxicating and addictive," she writes.

Ultimately, many technological interruptions come from other people, and they grab our attention because we desire connection, she writes. That same desire for connection is a

good compass to guide us: We should embrace tech when it brings us closer together, but change our behavior when it does the opposite.

That means putting down our phones and laptops at certain times—say, when having a conversation at work—but picking them up at other times. For example, Blankson encourages families to share their moments of gratitude on Facebook or Instagram, and recommends dozens of apps to help us become more giving, empathic citizens (see below).

“Does this technology truly make me happier and more productive?”

Besides being intentional about when to use technology, it’s also important to intentionally choose which technology to use. According to Blankson, technology users come in three flavors: Embracers, who like to be on the cutting edge; Accepters, who go along with mainstream trends; and Resisters, who can’t or don’t want to adopt certain tech. Knowing where you fit in can help you decide if you need to get an iPad, download the latest project management software, or use an activity tracker.

The key question to ask is: “Does this technology truly make me happier and more productive?” It’s an obvious question, of course, but one that we don’t always raise.

Finally, Blankson echoes the common advice to take time to unplug. Stepping away from our devices can improve our focus, helping us collaborate, learn, and socialize more effectively. In one experiment, Korean workers who took a break without their phones felt more energetic and less emotionally exhausted afterward compared to workers who brought their phones along, even if they didn’t use them. And studies are now suggesting that modern children need to unplug regularly in order to differentiate the real world from the virtual one.

Our technological lives are full of small decisions.

Blankson’s book isn’t the first to tell us that technology can be good or bad, that it depends on how we use it, and that we should be more mindful. But what she adds to the discussion is a deep understanding of the roots of well-being.

“Small decisions, which feel disjointed and innocuous, are the biggest determinants of our productivity, and ultimately of our happiness,” she writes. Our technological lives are full of small decisions—to comment or not, to switch on or off, to reach out or stay silent. All of us, through our little daily habits and choices, are determining whether our technological culture is a happy one.