

Going from mind-full to mindful

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March 5, 2022



DH



DECCAN HERALD



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- MAR 05 2022, 00:38 IST
- UPDATED: MAR 05 2022, 00:45 IST

The blurb on Nandan Nilekani and Tanuj Bhojwani's recent book *The Art of Bitfulness* says: "We are in a toxic relationship with our devices. The line between work and home has become blurrier than ever. The constant onslaught of information affects our mental peace. We all know this is not good for us. Yet, we can't help ourselves from going back for one more scroll..."

There is no doubt that technology is inseparable from our modern-day lives. And since it is here to stay, what can we do to mitigate its impact?

In the last two years, changes wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic made children study online, had professionals working from home engage in more video calls, and led to more virtual transactions than ever. While such technology adoption seemed to hold several positives initially — promising greater flexibility, reducing commute, perhaps even being more economical — its pernicious effects became visible soon.

Firstly, addiction to technology manifests in several ways — that one last mail to respond, one last tweet before going to bed, bingeing on Netflix, the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), hence the need to be constantly online.

Secondly, reduced effectiveness. Some people claim to have mastered the art of attending to multiple tasks simultaneously, but I would posit that it is an empty boast coming at the cost of effectiveness and perhaps productivity. I understand the context is changing rapidly, with expectations around response time getting crunched all the time. However,

Meetings run longer because we are doing our own thing with our laptops/mobiles. Often, we are seeking clarification on points when the discussion has moved on. We are reacting to bald statements and rarely responding to the whole communication, because there is no eye contact, and we are not reading the body language. We are unable to produce substantive well-reasoned arguments because our minds are moving from one issue to the next.

We push activities from our mailbox to the next without having done much but revel in the false satisfaction that it is off our 'To Do List'.

We mark communications indiscriminately because there is zero cost/effort in marking copies. We willy-nilly get drawn into discussions because not everyone has the wisdom to separate the vital from the trivial. In the process, the hierarchy of decisions that existed for good reasons has become a casualty.

We are connected 24/7 and yet disconnected from people.

Thirdly, harmful effects on physical and mental health, caused by increased screen-time and long work hours as well as blurred lines between livelihood and life. Eye disorders, carpal tunnel syndrome and postural spondylitis have become more prevalent. Equally, while technology creates a chimera of being in touch, people complain of loneliness and depression.

Here are a few solutions that people say have worked for them. They may help you too:

No mobile/laptop in meetings, except for reading documents. At Tesco, where I worked earlier, I saw a Main Board Director stop a meeting and give a lashing when someone's mobile went off.

Accepting that some things will go unanswered. You cannot respond to everything, every time. And if it is so critical, people will call you.

Off time (everything on silent) for the period you need to rest.

Planned breaks/vacations to keep body and mind in good shape.

Limiting the number of WhatsApp groups you are part of and even fewer where you participate actively.

If you believe you need a diamond to cut a diamond, you may want to check out some new-age technology apps (Off time, Freedom, Clear Lock, and so on), that track your technology usage and block time-wasters. Other apps such as Insight Timer provide guided meditation, encourage wellbeing, and promote fitness groups at the workplace. I have no deep experience of them yet.

Off time: Helps you unplug from your phone without missing important matters. Only lets in calls from a select list but otherwise shuts down apps, calls, texts, and emails. It can also auto-respond to incoming messages on your behalf while maintaining a careful activity log of everything you missed while away, so you can quickly catch up. You can track your phone usage with reports and score points for off-time from the device.

Freedom: This allows you to create a list of websites that you find most distracting, and it stops your device/computer from gaining access to them during a pre-determined period.

Insight Timer: A free smartphone app and online community for meditation and mindfulness practice. It helps you with guided meditations that time your mindfulness practice while simultaneously helping you use your smartphone as a spiritual link to meditators using 'insight connect'.

The sweep of technology in our lives will only advance; it is up to us to stay on top of it — for our own good.

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