

## **Technology Overload? Five Steps to Break Free**

**By Carol Ring**

Technology has been a revolutionary thing over the past few years, allowing us to do many things once thought impossible. We can work from home; we can make phone calls from the grocery store when we can't remember the right brand of coffee; we can instantly communicate with people on the other side of the globe; we can seek out the latest trends; we can mobilize on issues we care about. It has enabled us to use our household wireless internet connection on our laptop to send e-mails while we catch up on our favorite TV shows, to conference into a meeting while we drive, and to receive e-mails while listening to a presentation at a convention.

Unfortunately, though, too many people are overdosing on e-mails, Blackberries, and online activities, causing real psychological disorders that are destroying their lives. What happened to the notion that all the gizmos, gadgets, and services would free up people's time and enable them to enjoy a four-day work week with twice as much productivity? Technology happened, that's what.

Instead of streamlining our work, technology has added another dimension to the pile. Dan Stamp, Chairman of Priority Management, says, "Technology makes us accessible at all times, but we are just starting to realize that just because you can be accessible, doesn't mean you should be. The lines between our professional and personal lives are blurring thanks to cell phones, pagers, e-mail, and the wireless revolution. Our survey shows that our personal lives are the losers."

In fact, Priority Management is now using the phrase "Digital Depression" in its offerings. They talk about how digital depression is "a feeling of being powerless and unable to keep pace, leading to skyrocketing stress levels and decreasing productivity." Additionally, in his article titled "Overloaded Circuits," Edward Hallowell talks about a new neurological disorder he calls attention deficit trait (ADT). "ADT isn't an illness or character defect. It's our brains' natural response to exploding demands on our time and attention." Distractibility, inner frenzy, and impatience are all core symptoms.

Hallowell goes on to describe that when a person is doing well, the deep centers of the brain will send messages of excitement, satisfaction, and joy. But when you are faced with critical decisions through multiple interruptions as you frantically search for missing information again, all while the 12<sup>th</sup> impossible request has just dinged into your inbox, then your brain begins to panic.

We have fooled ourselves into believing that with a plethora of electronic devices we will be better able to balance our lives. We accept what was never acceptable before: Crackberry lingo for those who can't put their Blackberries away during dinner, loud cell phone conversations in public place, iPod shut out. We can't go to sleep at night until we check our e-mail just one more time. We have allowed technology to take over our life and to determine our focus

Fortunately, you *can* control how technology participates in your life. The following suggestions will help.

### **1. Evaluate the time you are “connected.”**

Do your outgoing e-mails routinely have times stamps of 2 a.m.? Realize that it's okay to do e-mail during off-hours as long as it's because you were engaged in personal activities during the day, such as your child's soccer game at 3 p.m. Dividing your workday is not a problem. The problem comes when you work a full eight-hour day, plus stay up into the wee hours of the night to do e-mail. This is when you need to evaluate your “on” time.

The fact is that most people underestimate the number of hours they're connected. Therefore, honestly document the amount of time you're connected each day. Is your cell phone always on? Are you regularly on the computer until midnight? Do you check your messages while you're playing with the kids? Is your e-mail program always running in the background? Do you feel panicked when you're unplugged? Then, figure out why you are connected at certain times. Why can't you turn the device or program off? If you can acknowledge that you don't want to be addicted to drugs or alcohol, then you can also acknowledge that you don't want to be addicted to technology.

### **2. Assess the main aspects of your life.**

If you're spending an inordinate amount of time focused on your technology and being connected, then chances are you're not spending enough time on family, friends, and other personal relationships and activities. Take some time to detail what's truly important to you in life. What makes you happy? What do you enjoy? How do you want people to remember you? Life isn't very fulfilling when you lose sight of what's important. When you lack a sense of purpose and meaningful connections, you can quickly feel empty and stuck in a dead end. Therefore, know what's important to you and put your focus there.

### **3. Change the paradigm by listing how technology tools should ease your life.**

Technology can be your friend, if you use it within boundaries and limits, and for the reason it was intended. The cell phone, for example, is all about mobility. The advantage is that you can use it anywhere. So if you want to be somewhere other than your office while waiting for an important phone call, your cell phone gives you that freedom. Likewise, e-mail allows you to communicate anywhere, anytime. In the past you had to dictate a letter so your secretary could type it up. Now you can write the letter yourself and you can do it at 8 a.m. or 10 p.m., whatever is convenient for you.

Get back to the basics of why you needed the technology or program in the first place. Chances are you didn't say, “I want e-mail so I can put in an 18-hour workday.” Nor did you say, “I want a cell phone so my boss, clients, and co-workers can reach me 24/7.” You wanted these tools as a convenience, not as a burden. Therefore, shift your thinking and map out how you can best use the devices or programs in a way that's convenient for you.

#### **4. Stop blaming the technology.**

Many people say such things as, “Technology is awful.” “I wish they had never invented this thing.” “Why can’t people stop calling (or e-mailing) me?” If you feel that technology is to blame for all your woes, think again...and then take a good look in the mirror. If you feel that you can’t get away from the constant ringing of your cell phone or the non-stop barrage of e-mail messages, maybe it’s time to take some responsibility for your situation. After all, if you can’t turn your cell phone off for an hour (or disable your e-mail for a half-day), what does that say about the way you’re managing your life? Remember, someone has to push the “on” button.

#### **5. Get serious about time management.**

Face it...the issue here is not really about technology; it’s about time management. How are you choosing to spend your time? Instead of allowing incoming e-mail messages to always pop up on your screen, only check your e-mail twice per day, scheduling a certain amount of time for each e-mail session. If you allow your incoming office calls to go to voicemail, why can’t you turn off your cell phone for certain hours of the day and let those calls go to voicemail? Schedule your technology-related items and priorities just as you would any other task on your to-do list. Make a schedule that includes time for everything—work and personal activities—and then stick to it.

#### **Tame the Beast**

Ultimately, you should be using your various technology options only when it’s convenient for you, only when it can boost your productivity, and only when it allows you to become a part of the issues you care about. Technology can be a friend rather than a cumbersome, life-threatening addiction. By taking a few simple steps to tame the technology you use regularly, you can regain control of your day...and your life.

#### *About the Author:*

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