



# Guide to screen addictions and responsible digital use

Have you been spending more time on your phone or laptop? The way we spend our time has been changing as a result of COVID-19. Whether it's during a lockdown or as we adjust to new norms, it's likely you've been spending more time on your devices.

The pandemic may have encouraged more screen-related bad habits, but the risks were always there. How does your time online make you feel? Are you able to switch off when you need to?

The time we spend in front of screens has a huge influence on our lives. Take control and ensure your digital devices have a positive impact on your life.



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## How technology use has changed

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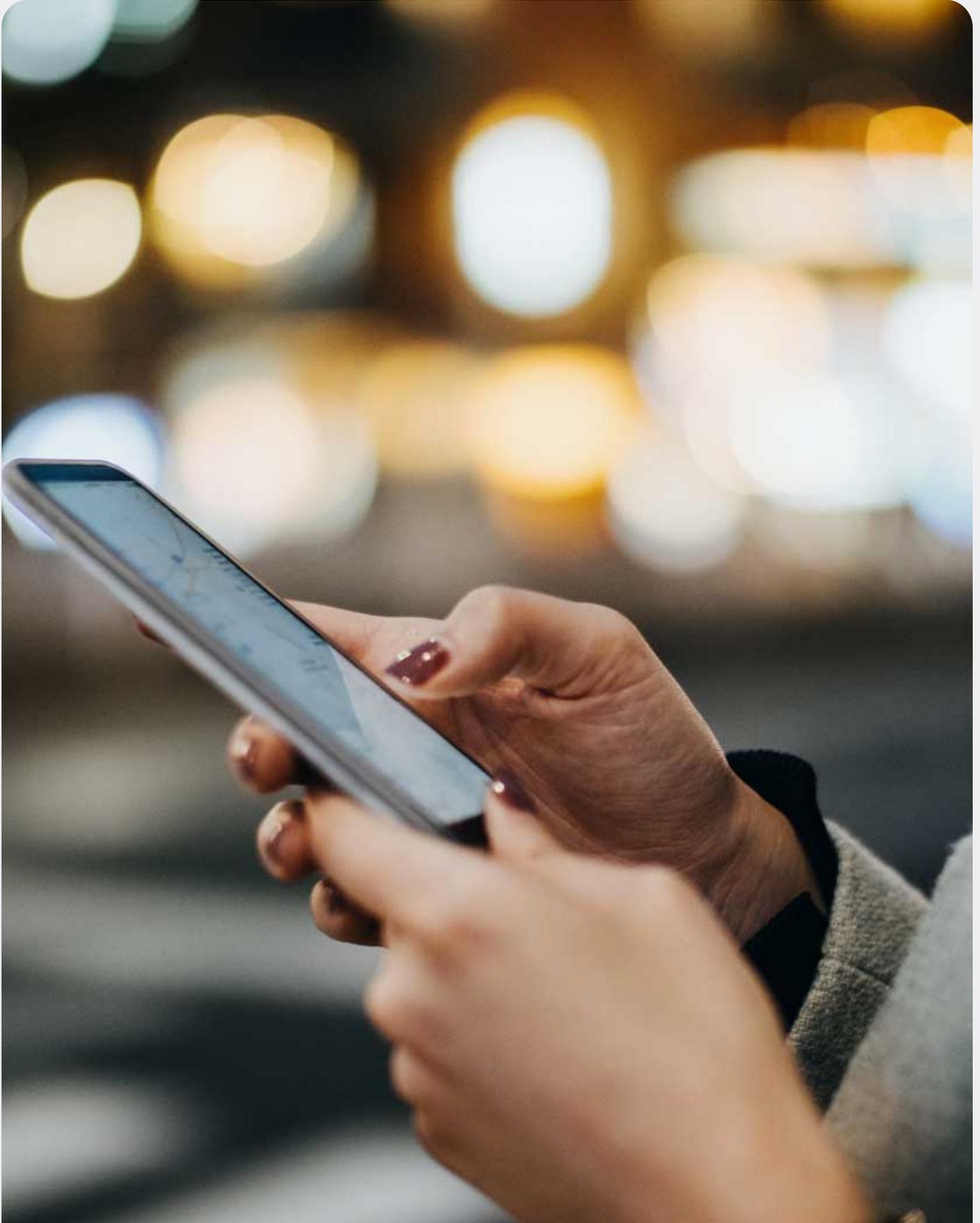
Thinking back to a time when digital devices didn't exist or weren't easily accessible may feel like ancient history. But it really wasn't that long ago. Internet use, including emails, only became more widespread when broadband allowed the signal in one line to be split between telephone and internet in the early 2000s.

Fast forward to 2008, and 17% of people owned a smartphone, according to **Ofcom data**. A smartphone does a lot more than make phone calls and send text messages. Back when you could have only browsed the internet home by kicking someone off a landline phone, shopping or watching a film on a phone might have felt impossible. But by 2018, smartphone ownership was up to 78%, and 95% among 16-24 year-olds, many of whom would feel lost without their smartphones.

According to Ofcom, the proportion of people accessing the internet on their mobile has increased from 20% in 2008 to 72% in 2018. What's more:

- 64% say the internet is an essential part of their life
- 72% of adults say their smartphone is their most important device for accessing the internet
- 71% say they never turn off their phone

- 71% say they never turn off their phone
- 78% say they could not live without it





## An insight into screen reliance in the UK

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During the national lockdown, people in the UK **spent 40% of their day watching TV and online video services**. The time spent on apps on Android devices **increased 20% year-on-year** in the first quarter of 2020, and consumer spending in both iOS and Google Play apps was up year-on-year 5% and 15% respectively. Data **provided to Radio 1 Newsbeat** showed overall phone usage was up by about 30% from pre-pandemic levels.

That's a lot of screen time, especially given that **research** from before the pandemic reported that people already generally spend an average of three hours and 15 minutes on their phones every day. The top 20% of smartphone users spend upwards of four-and-a-half hours on their devices and few of us go longer than one hour and 43 minutes during the day without touching our phones.

It might feel like a lot of data, but some of us may be unaware how reliant we are on the screens around us, either picking them up or turning them on regularly.

## How to check your screen usage on a mobile device

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Have you ever received a notification from your phone telling you how much time you've spent using it that week? It can be quite alarming and may feel like you're being shamed by your own phone. But it can be the first step in realising you want to cut down on your phone usage.

Holly Niblett, Head of Digital takes us through how you can check your screen usage on your mobile device.

Holly says, "On an iPhone, you can check your screen usage by:

- Going to settings
- Tapping screen time
- Tapping 'See all activity' under the graph

- You can see usage, how many times a device was picked up and more

- You can see usage, how many times a device was picked up and more
- If you have other Apple devices and have turned on Share Across Devices, you can view overall usage across all devices signed in with your Apple ID and password



Android doesn't offer a screen time feature by default like iOS, but there are ways to check your usage. If you're using a Pixel device or a device that's running Android One, you can check your screen usage with Digital Wellbeing:

- Go to settings
- Click Digital Wellbeing

If your device doesn't support Digital Wellbeing, you can check screen time through power usage:

- Go to settings
- Click battery
- Tap the 3-dot menu and go to battery usage
- Tap the 3-dot menu and choose 'Show full device usage'

Unfortunately it only shows screen time since the last charge. It doesn't provide statistics on hours per day or week. To check and track daily screen time, you'd have to install a third-party app".

## The impact of COVID-19

We've seen that, unsurprisingly, most screen usage was up during the first national lockdown. When the UK government announced we'd be going in lockdown on 23 March 2020, people's day-to-day lives dramatically changed.

For a large part, it was a huge relief to have phones, laptops and other devices. People spent a lot of time on video calls and checking in with each other – potentially more often than before. Many of us were able to carry on working from home. Hobbies and interests could continue by moving to virtual events where possible.

But this increase in screen use didn't go unnoticed, or without raising some concerns. For example, **Education Technology** wrote about one study which showed that more than half (53%) of UK parents were concerned that excessive screen time while schools are closed could cause addiction in their children later down the line.

In the study of 2,000 adults, just 12% stated that screen time is spent learning, with parents mentioning that laptops, mobile phones and other devices are mainly being used as entertainment tools.

Some of this time has been helpful, assisting tired parents who were trying to balance working and teaching their children. Normal household rules around kids' screen time may have evaporated during lockdown.

But it is important during uncertain times for children to communicate and play with their friends. Video games and social media are some of the easiest ways for them to connect while socialising is restricted.

Screens have also been encouraged as part of efforts to keep active. During lockdown when outdoor movement was restricted, World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended playing active video games or trying exercise classes online.

You're not alone if you've ever expressed concerns over the impact your smartphone has on your wellbeing. It's something a lot of us worry about.



## Responsible digital behaviours

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Working out what amount of screen time is or isn't good for you isn't a simple task. Although some studies or experts claim to have a figure, it won't be suitable for all.

Whether or not your screen use interferes with your life is something for you to work out. The patterns, habits and feelings behind our screen use are potentially of more interest than the volume of use. Using screens carefully may be more important than using them less. However long you spend, there are healthier habits and responsible ways to be online that everyone can embrace.

## How does your time online make you feel?

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Have you ever actively tried to spend time off the internet and away from your devices? The idea of a digital detox is an increasingly popular one. In fact, seven in ten people have tried to moderate their digital consumption in some way. In this **study by market research consultants GlobalWebIndex**, the respondents were divided into:

- **Digital detoxers.** People who had detoxed from their digital devices completely for any extended time.
- **Digital dieters.** People who had taken steps to cut down the time they spent online or on devices.
- **The digital comfortable.** People who didn't feel the need to cut down at all.

And among the things digital dieters were trying to do to cut back their digital consumption GWI found:

- 37% had deleted an app or program in the previous month
- 35% taken short breaks for hours at a time
- 27% had limited their digital intake to emails or other routine activities
- 24% had switched off notifications or emails
- 23% had moved their phones out of the bedroom

In another **study by telecoms watchdog Ofcom**, around a third of people say they feel either cut off (34%) or lost (29%) without the internet, and 17% say they find it stressful. Half of all adults (50%) say their life would be boring if they could not access the internet. But there are some positives. 10% feel more productive offline, rising to 15% for 18 to 34-year-olds, and 16% say they feel less distracted.

How do you feel when you spend time away from screens and off the internet? It's important to start reflecting on how your time spent on digital devices makes you feel.

## Healthy habits to embrace

First things first, do you know why you end up staring at a screen? More often than not, we now turn to our phones, tablets, laptops and TVs out of habit. One of the first healthy habits to embrace is planning. If you can schedule dedicated parts of your day which don't involve a screen, you'll be reducing the amount of time you just end up in front of one. Some examples include:

- **Restricted use in the morning.** Don't use your phone as an alarm clock. That way you don't even need to pick it up and you can have some time first thing – ideally an hour – without a screen.
- **Taking a proper lunch break.** Do you use a screen for work? If so, having a lunch break away from any screen (including your phone) is a great idea. Plan a walk and just enjoy some fresh air or do an errand.
- **Meal times with your family or friends.** If you're spending time with people, it's nice to be present. It sounds like something your parents will have told you as a teenager, but enjoying a dinner without devices is good for everyone involved.
- **Avoiding screens before bed.** Looking at a screen too close to bedtime can impact how easily you'll fall asleep, so it's a key part of the day to cut down on your usage.

Our Head of Digital, Holly says, “you can use your phone to help with this planning as most smartphones allow you to schedule downtime, mute notifications or set limits for individual apps. On Apple devices, ‘downtime’ can be scheduled within the settings. It's basically a nap for your phone and only features that you choose to allow are available. If you'd rather, you could also set daily limits for each category of apps – for example, a limit on social media apps during work hours”.

## Understanding screen addictions

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Without a doubt, we're in a time where technology use is unprecedented. It's unlikely that will change anytime soon. But awareness is growing around certain addictive behaviours that arise as a result of too much screen time.

Screen addiction can happen when screen use is so compulsive it impairs daily functioning. This could be affecting your productivity, relationships, health or wellbeing.

When the WHO added gaming disorder to their **list of diseases**, they didn't talk about it in hours of screen time, rather the impact the hours spent gaming on a screen actually has: "For gaming disorder to be diagnosed, the behaviour pattern must be of sufficient severity to result in significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning and would normally have been evident for at least 12 months."



In general, three behaviours can help you identify whether you may be becoming addicted to your device:

- **Cravings.** Do you want to look at your devices, sometimes at the expense of other activities? That's a craving.
- **Tolerance.** Do you increasingly need to spend more time on your phone? If your screen usage is going up, your tolerance is going up. You need more time to get the same fulfilment as before.
- **Withdrawal.** Do you feel a change in your mood for the worse when you can't use your device? People can feel agitated, sad or even angry when their phones not available.

Asking these questions isn't supposed to make you feel bad about yourself. Addiction is a very charged word, and there are plenty of reasons your screen use may be higher than usual – especially during the current COVID-19 situation or if you work using a screen.

Try not to compare yourself with others, but instead focus on how your screen time makes you feel and how you feel without it.

## Why we rely on our screens

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### Oxytocin

Oxytocin is best known as the 'love hormone'. But it's also primarily a molecule of social connection. But how is this relevant to our screen use? Well, oxytocin is triggered when we use social networking apps. Our brains interpret tweeting or messaging as if we're directing interacting with people we can about. Posting a photo, responding to comments, tweeting people – it can all give a feeling similar to meeting with friends in person.

### Dopamine

Dopamine is another reason we've come to somewhat depend on technology. In a social content, any positive social stimuli can result in dopamine being released – almost like a reward. It reinforces the behaviour that preceded it, which includes interaction over any screen. Text messages, likes and comments, notifications – they all have the potential to release dopamine.

The result tends to be short-term, addictive, dopamine-driven feedback loops. If you compulsively check for notifications, it's because most apps use variable reward schedules optimised to encourage you to stay engaged. We perceive the reward to be delivered at random and end up checking habitually – almost in the same way a slot machine works.

## Cortisol

Cortisol is known as the 'fight-or-flight' hormone. It's what lets you know when you're in potential danger. But if you're the type of person who regularly (say, every 15 or so minutes) checks your phone, putting it down can trigger a release of cortisol. When we don't have an alert or notification every time we check our phones, so our brain starts to wonder about checking. To get rid of the anxious feeling that cortisol gives you, you pick up your phone to see if anything has happened.

Putting down the phone doesn't shut off your brain. The effects of using our devices and staring at screens don't stop when we stop. But as we learn more about what's going on in our heads when we use digital devices, we can reflect on our usage and start to change how they make us feel. We can actively try to create situations where we don't need our devices.

## What to do about it

By now it should be no surprise to people who use devices: they're designed to attract and keep our attention. With this dopamine-driven behaviour and reward loop, the odds are stacked against us.

You can influence how much your devices influence you. Being aware of what's going on is a good first step. You can then consider:

- **Turning your screen into black and white.** This can minimise how stimulating and attention-grabbing a device is, meaning you're less likely to be drawn to or distracted by it.

How to turn on iPhone greyscale mode	How to turn on Android greyscale mode
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open up the Settings app</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You'll need to turn on developer mode               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Go to 'About Device' and then</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

- Click on 'General' and then go to 'Accessibility'
- The greyscale option can be found in the 'vision' section
- Turn it on

press 'Build Number' several times until the phone says you're a developer

- Go back to settings and above 'About Device' you will now see 'Developer Options' - click this
- Select 'Simulate Colour Space' and set it to 'Monochrome'

## When to tackle digital use problems

Are you now wondering whether you're spending too much time on your device? Signs you may have a problem include if it's:

- interfering with your work or school life
- become a negative in your relationships
- encouraging you to sit around more
- affecting your sleep
- making you feel anxious or unhappy

When we use devices, we often find ourselves in a cycle. Any negative feelings associated with not using a device normally vanish when we pick them up again. So we keep repeating the behaviour.

It will take some commitment, but it is possible to tackle some of the main issues associated with excessive digital use. But remember that it can take anything between a few weeks to many months to form new habits – so keep persisting. So what should you do? Start by:

- Using technology to your advantage and set time limits on certain apps. After you've used up your daily allowance, you won't be able to use them anymore.
- Have a conversation about boundaries with your friends or family. Agree on when devices should be off limits so that everyone can be present. A good example of this would be mealtimes

would be healthier.

- Make sure you've organised enough fun activities which don't require a device. Whether it's physical activity or spending time with friends, make it hard for you to check your device. Recognise and praise yourself for spending time without a screen.

## Useful links

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How to make your phone limit your screen time for you -

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/01/smarter-living/how-to-make-your-phone-limit-your-screen-time-for-you.html>

How to take a digital detox during the COVID-19 pandemic -

<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200513-how-to-take-a-digital-detox-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>

How to handle screen pandemic during the COVID-19 pandemic -

<https://www.harvardpilgrim.org/hapiguide/how-to-handle-screen-time-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

How much screen time is too much? - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/tech-happy-life/201812/how-much-screen-time-is-too-much>

Experts say "how much" is the wrong way to assess screen time -

<https://time.com/5592329/experts-say-how-much-is-the-wrong-way-to-assess-screen-time/>

The health impacts of screen time: a guide for clinicians and parents -

[https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-12/rcpch\\_screen\\_time\\_guide\\_-\\_final.pdf](https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-12/rcpch_screen_time_guide_-_final.pdf)

Screen time and children: How to guide your child - <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/childrens-health/in-depth/screen-time/art-20047952>

Health screen time guidelines for families -

<https://www.ourfamilywizard.co.uk/blog/healthy-screen-time-guidelines-families>

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