How to be a Digital Detox athlete



Introduction

Colin Corby is **The Digital Detox Coach** and is dedicated to helping individuals and organizations reclaim time, energy, and space for a healthier, more productive, and sustainable tech-life balance.

In his recent talk "***Digital Detox Strategies – How to optimize your relationship with tech"*** at Elevate 2025, he introduced the concept that digital detox is not just about disconnecting – it's a mindset shift.

Being a **"Digital Detox Athlete"** means training your mind and habits, much like an endurance athlete — to be able to live sustainably, as a biological human, with technology.

Digital Detox is your **digital habit 'off switch'**. Continue reading to find out how you could become a digital detox athlete.

For information on coaching visit the website:

So what is Digital Detox?

Digital detox is simply a period of time when you're disconnected from smartphones, iPads and computers and you're offline**.**

- It can be as short as 20 seconds, if you are resting your eyes from staring at a screen
- Or as long as spending a week in nature,
- And everything in-between.

Digital detox helps us support what we need as biological humans to thrive and be at our best.

You can think of it as your **digital habit 'off switch'**. But a real digital detox is not a one off event, rather a **lifestyle change,** one that supports your wellbeing and becomes part of your daily life.

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Why habits are so hard to change?

According to Prof Wendy Wood's research around **43% of what we do every day is driven by habit**, not conscious decision-making. [1] We have evolved to be creatures of habit. They are our autopilot, efficient mental shortcuts that we don't have to think about, telling us what to do and when to get a positive experience or reward. All we have to do is be in the right environment and the behaviour automatically comes to mind.

For example: The environment could be a particular location, a certain time of day, the people around us, or our recent actions.

It takes an average of **66** days to form new habits, but it could range between **18 to 254** days [2]

Everyone's habit formation may be different; however **repetition** is the key to making them work.

So it should come as no surprise that we have all developed some bad digital habits repeating the same actions on our smartphones every day for years. Whether it's doomscrolling, being distracted, or turning to them as a comfort blanket just to keep ourselves busy.

We probably all realise by now that spending less time on our smartphones is a good idea.

But **knowing what you should do is not enough**. Like trying to resist your favourite chocolate in a sweet shop, sheer willpower alone won't do it. You need strategy, practice, and structure to change.

Key Digital Detox Strategies

Digital Detox Strategy 1

If you want to spend less time on your smartphone and change your digital habits -

- Change the **environment** that triggers them.
- Create **friction** to make them harder.
- **Replace** them with something else that you enjoy and **repeat**.

Digital detox strategy 2

For all the important things you ever need to do -

- They are better done one at a time.
- Avoid multitasking.
- Train yourself to do just one thing at a time.

Digital detox strategy 3

Adopt the mindset of a digital detox endurance athlete –

- It's a journey. Progress is made through many small steps
- Stay patient. Like training for a marathon, meaningful change comes slowly, but it comes.

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Your Digital Detox training plans

Step 1: Set your goal

Why digital detox? What changes do you want to make and what will this enable you to do if you succeed?

- Less stress and anxiety?
- More time for family & friends, nature, exercise or study?
- Improved focus, productivity, and creativity at work?

Whatever your goals are, write these down. Place them somewhere visible, like your fridge, to help you stay motivated.

Step 2: Stay accountable

How will you ensure you stick to your plan?

- Share your goal with a friend who can encourage and support you.
- Reward yourself when milestones are achieved.
- Keep a journal.

Step 3: Find Support

What resources and support will you need?

- A buddy system: Partner with a friend doing a digital detox too.
- A coach: To guide and motivate you.
- Tools and challenges: Build your digital detox with structured activities.

Choose your digital detox training plan

Creating new habits takes time, even the simple ones. Initially, when we do something new, we must consciously think about it, however by repeating the behaviour many times we encode it into our unconscious and are then able to do it without thinking.

Please refer to the Digital Detox tools and challenges section for the full details of each activity.

Option 1: 5 Day Digital Detox Sprint

Try a new challenge every day for four days and then on the fifth you try all four together.

- **Day 1 - Protect Your Sleep** – No screens before bed or immediately after waking.
- **Day 2 - Rest & Recovery** – Plan screen-free breaks during the day.
- **Day 3 - Prioritise Human Connection** – Practice Being fully present with others.
- **Day 4 - Just One Thing** – One task only.
- **Day 5 - All of the Above** – Putting it all everything.

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Option 2: Digital Detox – Couch to 5k (9 weeks)

Inspired by the UK NHS 'Couch to 5k' running plan, the **'Digital Detox Couch to 5k'** is a 9 week programme designed to take you from sitting on the couch with your smartphone to engaging and being fully present in your favourite offline activities.

Choose at least three days per week to be your digital detox days and highlight them in your calendar. Each week you will add a new Digital Detox tool/challenge to the one(s) you already have. At the end of the 9 weeks you can add further Digital Detox tools/challenges or just continue with the ones that you have.

- **Week 1 – Protect your sleep** – No screens before bed or immediately after waking.
- **Week 2 – Rest and recovery** - Plan screen-free breaks during the day.
- **Week 3 – Prioritise human connections** - Be fully present with others.
- **Week 4 – Just one thing** - One task only.
- **Week 5 – Manage news consumption**– Control over when, where and for how long.
- **Week 6 – Limit social media** – Take a day off.
- **Week 7 – Get rid of distractions** – Focus on what you need to get done.
- **Week 8 – Is it useful?** – Changing the way you use your smartphone.
- **Week 9 – Pause and reflect** - Interrupt your urge to immediately react.

Tools and challenges for Digital Detox athletes

Before you start – Self-awareness Challenge

Self-awareness of our digital habits is essential to create a more sustainable relationship with our technology. Are we in control of our smartphone use, or does it exert too much control over us and how we live our lives?

The Digital Detox **'self-awareness'** challenge will help you with this question. There are four levels, with each level increasing in difficulty.

- **Level 1:** Requires you to just turn your smartphone to silent and place out of sight and resist checking your smartphone for an hour.
- **Level 2:** Requires you to turn your smartphone to silent and place face down where you can still see and reach it and resist picking it up for an hour.
- **Level 3:** Requires you to turn your smartphone to silent and place face up where you can still see and reach it and resist picking it up for an hour.
- **Level 4:** Leave your smartphone on and place face up where you can still see and easily reach it and resist picking it up for an hour.

If at any time you feel the urge to check or pickup your smartphone, try to notice what triggers that feeling.

When you have completed the four levels and noticed any feelings and thoughts that you had, you will have gained a greater awareness of the ability of your smartphone to exert an influence over your thoughts and behaviour.

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Here are my Digital Detox Challenges for you to try.

1. Protect your sleep

The **mere presence** of a smartphones at your bedside can impact the quality of your sleep.

This challenge is designed to create more distance between your smartphone and your all-important sleep.

- Don't have your smartphone anywhere near your bed.
- The last time you can look at your smartphone is one hour before you go to sleep.
- In the morning, for the first 30 minutes of the day, you may only switch off your alarm and look at the time.
- Keep a notepad by your bed to jot down any urgent thoughts or forgotten appointments. This way, you can drift off safe in the knowledge you won't forget them.

2. Rest and Recovery

Restore your **focus & attention,** manage information overload and stress, and give yourself time to think.

- Take 3 to 4 ten to fifteen minute intentional screen breaks during the day.
- Schedule them in your diary as an important part of your working day.

This could be at mealtimes or coffee breaks. Make sure that you have something else to do that you really enjoy, perhaps talking to a friend or colleague, playing with a pet or just being surrounded by nature.

3. Prioritise Human Connections

Be fully present when with other people.

- When with someone, put your smartphone away.
- Practice being fully present and see if you can pick up on what is not being said.

Human connection is essential for your mental health and your emotional intelligence.

4. Just one thing

We all want to be in control of technology rather than it controlling us.

- Whenever you pick up your smartphone, you are only allowed to do **'just one thing'.** This might be to check the weather, respond to a notification of a new email or message, or just look at your social media for a short period of time.
- Whatever it is, you can only do this one thing, and you must then wait at least 5 minutes before doing another thing on your smartphone.

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5. Manage news consumption

We might think that being digitally connected 24/7, with near instant updates at our fingertips, would keep us better informed about the world than ever. But we would be wrong! The media relies on drama to grab our attention. Negative stories, extreme opposites and conflicts are much more engaging and provocative. Through psychometric profiling and personalisation our media seeks to find the triggers that distract us the most, and we receive more and more news that reflects our existing points of view.

The media we consume impacts how we think, feel, and behave, and can be overwhelming. It can amplify our fears, uncertainties and doubts by reinforcing negative messages. We may find it harder to focus, pay attention and relax.

Scrolling through media on our devices as soon as we wake up impacts how we feel for the rest of the day. But we could choose not to scroll first thing, and then how we feel will be determined by factors more within our own control, such as how well we slept, how we interact with others and our own plans for the day.

How to exercise more control over when, where and for how long you consume news.

- Don't access any news or social media on your smartphone until after you've had time to set yourself up for the day and interact with family and colleagues.
- Limit the time you spend on catching up with the news, how often and when.
- Notice how well you are able to stick to your plan and adjust if necessary.

6. Limit social media

For many people, social media can be like diving down a rabbit hole, as once you're in there's no telling when you might surface again. However, what we see is often a carefully curated feed of 'best bits' which leaves us feeling that we are missing out, or edited stories that are designed to play to our emotions and cause us to react. Even though we know this, once inside the social media environment we are under its influence, and it will nudge our thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

How to create a healthy separation between you and the world of social media, so that you can limit its influence and be more in control of your thoughts, feelings and emotions:

- Choose at least one day to be your '**social media** free day and let your friends know.
- Make sure you have interesting and enjoyable things to do instead and, if you can, include social activities that connect you with other people, pets and nature.
- Spend the day without accessing any social media.

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7. Get rid of distractions

Have you ever wondered why many apps on your smartphone are designed to instantly grab your attention regardless of whether the content is urgent or has any real value to you? We can't help but be distracted, it's how we have evolved and is an important survival skill. Even if our smartphones are not trying to grab our attention, their mere presence will exert an influence on us so that we will distract ourselves to regularly check them just in case.

Being constantly distracted also encourages us to multitask, however would it surprise you to learn that our brains can't really multitask? To respond to distractions and interruptions the brain must switch tasks, and it can do this very quickly, so it fools us into believing that we are multitasking. But there is a high cost to pay for continually multitasking in terms of increased stress and anxiety. We also take longer to do things and so get less done.

Focus on what you need to get done:

- Choose at least one period of at least 40 minutes during the day to be your focus time.
- Put your smartphone out of reach and out of sight.
- Work on one important task before taking a short offline break.

8. Is it useful?

We carry our smartphones wherever we go, but the mere presence of them close at hand exerts a pull on our attention. We often pick them up as an unconscious habit when we are bored, putting off tasks that we'd rather not do or because we just want to feel busy. Similarly, having an app to help us with a task is not always the best way to achieve it.

How to change the way you look at your smartphones, as well as technology in general, by asking yourselves the question, how is it helping me achieve my objectives? Are there better ways to do this? Essentially, the aim is to view your smartphone as a tool that you can control and use, rather than a device that is able to exert control and influence over you.

- Do you need your smartphone to complete a task or activity?
- If not put your phone away in a safe place.
- Keep a notepad close by to jot down any urgent thoughts or ideas.

9. Pause and Reflect

We often react to things on our smartphones out of habit. Whether this is continually scrolling, automatically watching the next video or liking or commenting on a post, especially if it is emotionally charged or if we are tired.

How to interrupt the urge to immediately react to emotional content and provide you with time to think:

- Implement a 5-minute pause rule before reacting to emotional or sensational content online.
- This will give you time to think, activate your critical thinking skills to decide whether the content is fake, misleading or incomplete, whether you are being manipulated, what the purpose might be, and whether it is from a trusted source.

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- Importantly, it will allow you time to reflect on whether you really want to publish an online response that will be available for all to see forever, and whether that response is consistent with the values that you aspire to meet.

Bonus challenges.

10. Pay attention to nature

Our attention span has been getting shorter, in part due to how we interact with technology. In fact, we have become so used to being distracted, that we will often internally distract ourselves just to look at our smartphones. Have you also noticed that when people have nothing to do, they immediately pick up their smartphones to make themselves busy.

This challenge is ideal to practice on a warm sunny day when you are surrounded by nature. First find a quiet safe spot, either by yourself or with a friend, and put your smartphone away so that you can't see it . Take a few mindful breathes, relax and be receptive to the natural world around you. Once settled, your challenge is to:

- Notice **4** things in detail.
- Explore **3** things through your bodies sense of touch.
- Listen carefully to **2** sounds of nature.
- Smell **1** thing.

11. Watch TV

It's not unusual to have our smartphones with us whilst watching or streaming a TV show, and then being distracted by it and not paying full attention to the show. If it's a show you enjoy, and it's something that you would really like to watch, then this challenge will help you achieve this.

- The first part is to not look at your smartphone during the TV show, but you can, if you want, during the adverts.
- The second part is to not look at your smartphone at all if you are watching the TV show with someone else. Instead try talking to the other person during the adverts.

12. Setting an example

One of the best ways to help children have a healthy relationship with technology is by example.

- Put your smartphone out of the reach of children.
- Be fully present and smartphone free when with children.
- Follow national guidelines concerning children's use of computers, iPads and smartphones.

See more digital detox challenges on the website

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About Colin Corby

Colin Corby is a **digital detox** expert, keynote speaker and coach, creator of **The Digital Detox Coach**, founder and CEO of **Technology Wellbeing Ltd** and an **international TEDx speaker**. He has also appeared on the BBC Wales X-Ray programme in 2022 and is a regular podcast guest.

He loves to speak, coach, and give workshops on digital detox, digital wellbeing and human connection, as well as the mindset of a business endurance athlete.

Colin's mission is to help individuals and organisations rethink their relationship with technology for better wellbeing, focus, and balance. As a technologist and wellbeing advocate, Colin uniquely blends digital expertise with human psychology—helping people build habits that last.

As a technologist he closely follows the latest developments in AI and other technologies that have the potentially to impact our health and wellbeing. He is a member of the Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET) and holds a Post Graduate Diploma in Technology Management and Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Mathematics.

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Final Thoughts:

Becoming a Digital Detox Athlete is a journey, not a race.
Like any meaningful life change, it takes practice, patience, and purpose. But the rewards, clarity, calm, connection and creativity are more than worth the effort.

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Appendix

References and further information

1. Habits in everyday life: Thought, emotion, and action, (2002), W. Wood et al, (https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2F0022-3514.83.6.1281)

2. How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world, (2009), Phillippa Lally et.al, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ejsp.674

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