Digital Detox – 'Couch to 5k'



Nine weeks to a healthier relationship with technology

Technology is beneficial if its objectives align with our goals in a positive and supportive way. Whilst many of the apps we use have good intentions, ultimately they are designed primarily to meet the commercial objectives of the businesses behind them. This can often lead to a conflict with our goals and wellbeing.

The UK NHS 'Couch to 5k' app offers an inspiring alternative. It helps people who may never have run before to build up gradually to running 5km over nine weeks. Rather than expecting people to achieve everything at once, it gives them manageable challenges and encouragement to keep going. It's a great app and running regularly will improve the health of your heart and lungs, reduce stress and can also help boost confidence too.

Inspired by the UK NHS 'Couch to 5k', here is my ***Digital Detox 'Couch to 5k',*** which takes a similar approach but applies it to our relationship with technology.

Taking a regular digital detox can help us to reduce digital overload, manage stress and make more time for the people and things that matter the most to us. But knowing where to start, and sustaining new habits, can be difficult.

The Digital Detox: Couch to 5k is a free, nine-week programme of practical challenges designed to help you move from unconscious smartphone habits towards a more conscious and balanced use of technology. Each week introduces a new challenge, building on what you have learnt and practised in previous weeks. The aim is not to reject technology, but to put it back in its proper place: as a tool that supports you, rather than one that consumes too much of your time and attention.

The programme starts with small steps and gradually builds towards giving you greater freedom and choice to enjoy your favourite offline activities, connect with other people and experience the world around you.

The Digital Detox Coach

© Technology Wellbeing Ltd

Just like training for a 5k, creating new habits takes time, even the simple ones. Initially, when we do something new, we have to think about it, and this takes effort. However, by repeating the behaviour many times, we encode it into a habit that we can then do on autopilot.

If you've ever wondered whether your smartphone might be stealing more of your time and attention than you realise, take my *Digital Detox Self-Awareness Test*.

How The Programme Works

Before you start you may want to think about:

- What do you want to achieve?
- What changes to your digital habits do you want to make?
- What will these changes enable you to do?
- What is getting in the way and how can I overcome these?

For example:

- Are you looking to feel less stressed by freeing up more time for exercise or being in nature?
- Do you want to be more connected and fully present with the people around you?
- Do you want to be more focused, productive, or creative at work or in your personal life?
- Or do you want to be able to just switch off and fully relax?

Whatever your goals, write them down in priority order and place them somewhere visible, such as on the fridge, as this will help you stay motivated.

The next step is to decide how will you make yourself accountable for completing the ***Digital Detox 'Couch to 5k'*** programme, and what reward you will give yourself when you achieve it. Again, write this down with your goals.

Then for each challenge.

- Choose at least three days each week to practise the challenges.
- Add those days to your calendar.
- Each week you will add a new digital detox challenge to the ones you already have.
- Revisit your personal goals and your chosen way of staying accountable.
- During each challenge notice your thoughts, feelings and urges without judging yourself.
- If a challenge proves difficult, learn from the experience and try again.
- After 9 weeks you can add further challenges or just continue with the ones that you have.

Difficulty Level

The following provides a suggested guide to the difficulty level of each challenge:

Beginner 🟢 Intermediate 🟡 Advanced 🔴

The Digital Detox Coach

© Technology Wellbeing Ltd

The Challenges

1. **Digital Detox Snacks** - Build short, manageable screen-free breaks into your day.
2. **Bookend Your Sleep** - Protect the start and end of your day.
3. **Choose Your Media** – Consume news and social media more intentionally.
4. **Protect Your Attention** – Get rid of distractions and focus on one thing at a time.
5. **Prioritise Human Connection** – Be fully present with other people.
6. **Reconnect With Nature** - Reconnect with the natural world.
7. **Just One Thing** – Interrupt automatic smartphone habits.
8. **Digital Declutter** - Change your digital environment.
9. **In Control Day** - Put everything into practice for a day without your smartphone.

Week 1 – Digital Detox Snacks 🟢

Start your ***Digital Detox 'Couch to 5k'*** journey towards a healthier and more sustainable relationship with technology by building short, manageable screen-free breaks into your day

This challenge helps restore your focus and attention, manage information overload and stress, and create space and time to think.

✅ Take three or four intentional screen breaks of ten to fifteen minutes during the day.
✅ Schedule them in your diary as an important part of your working day.
✅ Choose an enjoyable alternative for each break.
✅ And move to an environment with fewer or no digital distractions.

You could schedule screen breaks at mealtimes or coffee breaks when you can talk with a colleague or friend, play with a pet or spend a few minutes in nature.

Reflection:

- Did you notice an improvement in your ability to focus after each break?
- What was most difficult about the challenge?
- What worked the best for you?

Week 2 – Bookend Your Sleep 🟢

How did you get on with *Digital Detox Snacks* challenge in week 1?

Week 2's challenge introduces healthy boundaries between your smartphone and your all-important sleep by protecting the start and end of your day, like bookends.

1. Protect Your Sleep

Sleep is so much more important than many of us realise. It plays a vital role in learning, memory, and overall brain and body health. However, since we have little conscious experience of it, it's easy to underestimate its value, and so many of us don't get enough to perform at our best.

The Digital Detox Coach

© Technology Wellbeing Ltd

But did you know that even the mere presence of a smartphone at your bedside can adversely affect the quality of your sleep? [1]

✅ Don't have your smartphone near your bed.
✅ The last time you can look at your smartphone is one hour before you want to go to sleep.
✅ Why not relax with a good book instead?
✅ Keep a notepad by your bed to jot down any urgent thoughts or reminders.

Reflection:

- Have you noticed an improvement in your sleep and energy levels?
- What did you do instead of scrolling on your smartphone before bed?

2. Protect Your Day

We are often at our best after a good night's sleep, but our mood, energy levels, good intentions, relationships and plans for the day can be derailed by doomscrolling the moment we wake up.

This challenge helps you begin your day intentionally.

✅ For the first 45 minutes after waking, you should only use your smartphone to switch off your alarm and check the time.
✅ Use this time to prepare for the day ahead and connect with the people around you.

Reflection:

- Was it useful to have the first 45 minutes to think about your day?
- What was most difficult about the challenge?
- What worked the best for you?

Week 3 – Choose Your Media 🟡

How did you get on with *Bookend Your Sleep* challenge in week 2?

Week 3's challenge invites you to consider how the news and media you consume might affect your mood and attention.

For many people, news and social media can be like diving down a rabbit hole. 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 media environment we are under its influence, and it can nudge our thoughts and feelings.

This challenge helps to create a healthy separation between you and the world of news and social media, so that you can limit their influence, spend less time on your smartphone and be more in control of your thoughts and emotions.

The Digital Detox Coach

© Technology Wellbeing Ltd

- ✅ Choose at least one day to be free from news and social media.
- ✅ Make sure you have interesting and enjoyable things to do instead.
- ✅ Make sure you have news and media notifications switched off on your smartphone.
- ✅ Just for one day don't check any news or social media apps on your smartphone.

Reflection:

- If you felt the urge to check your news or social media, what triggered that feeling?
- What was most difficult about the challenge?
- How do you now feel about the impact of your news and social media consumption?

Week 4 - Protect Your Attention 🔴

How did you get on with *Choose Your Media* challenge in week 3?

Week 4's challenge invites you to rethink how you view your smartphone and begin to reframe it as a useful technology tool rather than something that is always with you and there to distract you.

Our attention spans have been getting shorter, partly due to the way we interact with technology, especially our smartphones. In fact, we are so used to interruptions that we often interrupt ourselves. [2]

We can't help but be distracted, it's how we have evolved and is an important survival skill. But there is a high cost to being continually distracted, including increased stress and anxiety, taking longer to do things, and feeling overwhelmed.

This challenge helps to train your attention.

- ✅ Choose a number of activities during your day where you want to be focussed and fully present on a single task.
- ✅ During these activities purposely put your smartphone out of reach and out of sight.
- ✅ Focus on doing these single tasks for at least 40 minutes before taking a short break.
- ✅ Once you have completed the activity you can choose whether to use your smartphone again.

Reflection:

- If you felt the urge to check your smartphone, what triggered that feeling?
- What was most difficult about this challenge?
- Did you find it easier to make progress on the tasks you selected?

Week 5 – Prioritise Human Connection 🟡

How did you get on with *Protect Your Attention* challenge in week 4?

Week 5's challenge is designed to help you become more present in your human interactions.

Humans have evolved to be social animals, so having good connections with other people, particularly our friends, family and colleagues, is an essential ingredient for our wellbeing. However, online connection

The Digital Detox Coach

© Technology Wellbeing Ltd

isn't the same as connection in the physical world and so should be viewed as an addition to, rather than a replacement for, face-to-face connection.

This challenge gives you the opportunity to strengthen existing relationships, build new ones, and feel a greater sense of connection with other people.

✅ Choose at least one day to be your human connection day.
✅ Use the list below as a guide to improving your human connections.
- **Make it personal** – Replace a text message with a phone call or arrange to meet a friend in person. Share a light-hearted TikTok or YouTube video together rather than watching alone.
- **Practise active listening** – When meeting someone, focus on listening to them, and see if you can pick up on what is not being said.
- **Reconnect** – Reach out to someone you have not spoken to in a while.
- **Introduce yourself** – Say hello to people you often see, but don't know.
- **Offer kindness** – Carry out a small, thoughtful act of kindness to brighten someone's day. It will make you feel good too!
- **Explore together** – Try a new group activity or community event to meet people with shared interests.
- **Ask for support** – Don't be afraid to seek help when needed; it can strengthen mutual trust.
- **Share a meal** – Choose a communal space for lunch and start a conversation with someone new.

✅ When with someone, remember to put your smartphone away.

Reflection:

- Which of the ideas in the list did you find most difficult?
- How did connecting with other people make you feel?

Week 6 – Reconnect With Nature 🟢

How did you get on with the *Prioritise Human Connection* challenge in week 5?

In her book *Good Nature: Improve Your Health and Happiness with Nature – One Simple Step at a Time,* (2024) [3], Professor Kathy Willis brings together scientific research on why nature is so important for our physical and mental wellbeing, as well as our ability to focus. These include:

- Looking at natural scenes triggers psychological and physiological responses that promote calmness, faster recovery from stress, and improvements in our working memory and attention.
- Seeing green leaves can make us happier, calmer, more focused and creative. Foliage with a variety of colours may be even more beneficial.
- Natural sounds, just like sights and smells, support both physical and mental health.
- Interacting with the natural world and its rich microbial diversity can also enhance our own microbiome diversity in beneficial ways.

She also recommends spending at least 20 minutes outdoors in a biodiverse green space three or four times a week to experience a wide range of health benefits.

The Digital Detox Coach

© Technology Wellbeing Ltd

This challenge invites you to pause, unplug, and immerse yourself in nature, giving your brain a much-needed break from constant digital stimulation.

✅ Find a green space near your home, workplace, or along a route you often take.
✅ Switch your phone to silent and put it away where you can't see it.
✅ Set a simple intention to just be present.
✅ Take a slow, mindful 20-minute walk.
✅ Notice the natural world around you; the light, colours, sounds and smells.
✅ Let your thoughts wander without judgement. If your mind drifts to your to-do list, gently bring your focus back to your surroundings.

Reflection:

- Did you feel calmer and more relaxed in nature?

Week 7 - Just One Thing 🔴

How did you get on with the *Reconnect With Nature* challenge in week 6?

Smartphones and their apps are designed to nudge our behaviour and create unconscious habits, and for much of the time, we don't even realise it's happening. However, if we place an interrupt into the habit, then we will create time to consciously decide whether this action is something we really want to do.

But it is hard to do this when we are already on our smartphone, and when our unconscious habits are in full swing. It's best to think about what we need or want to do in advance, and set an intention to do it, before picking up our smartphone.

This challenge trains your ability to choose how you use your smartphone.

✅ Select a minimum of one hour to practice this challenge.
✅ Before you reach for your smartphone, decide in advance on a single task (check the weather, reply to a message, scroll through social media briefly, etc.)
✅ When you pick up your smartphone make sure you go straight to that task.
✅ Once completed, put your smartphone down and wait at least five minutes before doing another single task.

This small pause acts as an interrupt in the habit loop, shifting your smartphone use from automatic to intentional. Over time, practising these interruptions can help retrain your brain to be more deliberate and reduce the urge to check your smartphone compulsively.

If you find yourself doing more than one thing on your smartphone, remind yourself of the challenge and try again.

Reflection:

- How did it make you feel to only be able to do one thing on your smartphone?

the Digital Detox Coach

© Technology Wellbeing Ltd

- If you found yourself doing more than one thing on your smartphone, what triggered that feeling?

Week 8 – Digital Declutter 🟡

How did you get on with the *Just One Thing* challenge in week 7?

We are now at week 8 of our 9 week ***Digital Detox – 'Couch to 5k'*** challenge and only have two more challenges left to add.

1. Declutter Your Environment

We carry our smartphones wherever we go and 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.

The aim of this challenge is to view your smartphone as a useful tool and encourage intentional use, rather than allowing it to exert control and influence over you.

✅ Choose a safe place where you can store your smartphone when not in use.
✅ Then get on with your day without carrying your smartphone around with you.
✅ Only take your smartphone from the store when you want or need to use it.
✅ Then return your smartphone to the store and continue with your day.
✅ If it helps, you can decide to use your smartphone at certain times of the day.

If you feel the urge to carry with you wherever you go, try to notice what triggers that feeling.

Reflection:

- How did it feel to be without your smartphone, but knowing that you could access it if needed?

2. Declutter Your Smartphone

Too much choice often leads to no choice at all. When our digital world is cluttered, our attention is constantly pulled in multiple directions, increasing decision fatigue and leaving us feeling overwhelmed. By decluttering our devices, we reduce the number of small decisions we make each day, helping us feel calmer, more in control and more satisfied.

✅ Select one hour to practice this challenge
✅ Delete any apps on your phone that you rarely or never use.
✅ Rearrange your remaining apps so that only the most important ones appear on your first screen.
✅ If you also use a laptop or iPad, decide which device you need to access each app from.

As you declutter your phone, notice how reducing visual noise and choice can create a greater sense of clarity, ease and control.

Reflection:

The Digital Detox Coach

© Technology Wellbeing Ltd

- How did it feel to delete apps you no longer use?
- Did you notice any resistance, guilt or relief?
- How does your phone feel to look at now compared to before?

Week 9 – In Control Day 🔴

How did you get on with the *Digital Declutter* challenge in week 8?

We are now in the final week of our nine- week ***Digital Detox – 'Couch to 5k'*** challenge, with just one more challenge to complete before you have achieved your goal.

By completing the challenges of the previous 8 weeks, you have practised some of the skills that will help you feel more at ease without your smartphone.

This last challenge is to spend just one day without your smartphone.

It will leave you free to connect with other people and the real world around you.

- ✅ Choose one day to be your smartphone-free day and put it in your calendar.
- ✅ Make sure you have an interesting day of activities planned.
- ✅ Choose a safe place where you can store your smartphone.
- ✅ Let friends and family know how to contact you in an emergency.
- ✅ Then get on with your day without your smartphone.

Reflection:
After completing this challenge, take a few minutes to reflect on how it felt to have spent a whole day without looking at your phone.

Congratulations! You've completed *Digital Detox: Couch to 5k*

Over the past nine weeks, you have explored how your smartphone influences your attention, habits and the way you spend your time. More importantly, you have had the opportunity to try different ways of changing that relationship.

There is no need to adopt every challenge permanently. The aim is to discover what works for you and what helps you make more time for the people, activities and experiences that matter.

Reflection:
- Which challenge did you find most difficult, and why?
- Which made the biggest difference to how you felt or spent your time?
- Which habits would you like to keep?
- What would you like to do with the time and attention you have reclaimed?

Choose one or two changes to carry forward. You can always return to the other challenges when you need a reminder or want to make further changes.

The Digital Detox Coach

© Technology Wellbeing Ltd

Remember, the aim is not to live without technology. It is to use technology more consciously, on your own terms, and to make sure it supports the life you want to lead.

Let me know how you get on and whether you enjoyed the ***Digital Detox – 'Couch to 5k'*** challenge, which of the challenges you found the most difficult and, most importantly, which ones you will try to incorporate into your daily routine.

Final Thought

In a recent US study, 467 people turned their smartphones into what were effectively dumb phones for two weeks. They could still make calls and send texts, but they could no longer access the internet from their smartphones. They could still access the internet from their computers. [4]

Their average daily screen time fell from around 5¼ hours to 2 hours and 40 minutes. Interestingly, they also spent more time socialising in person, exercising and being in nature.

How to Continue Your Digital Detox Journey

The Digital Detox Guide is a free monthly article available on Substack with practical challenges and invitations to be more intentional with technology.
The Digital Detox Coach website contains news and information on Digital Wellbeing, talks, workshops and coaching.

About the Author

Colin Corby is a Digital Wellbeing & Human Performance expert, Keynote Speaker and Coach, helping people reclaim their focus and energy so they can perform at their best in an increasingly digital and AI-powered world.

References:

[1] 'The mere presence of a smartphone reduces basal attentional performance,' Jeanette Skowronek, Andreas Seifert & Sven Lindberg, Nature Scientific Reports · 08 June 2023
[2] 'Attention Span – Finding Focus for a Fulfilling Life', (2023), Gloria Mark, William Collins, P95
[3] 'Good Nature: Improve Your Health and Happiness With Nature – One Simple Step at a Time', (2024), Kathy Willis, Bloomsbury Tonic,
[4] Castelo, N., Kushlev, K., Ward, A. F., Esterman, M., & Reiner, P. B. (2025). Blocking mobile internet on smartphones improves sustained attention, mental health, and subjective well-being. PNAS Nexus, 4(2), pgaf017

----- End -----

The Digital Detox Coach

© Technology Wellbeing Ltd