



Introduction

For technology to be beneficial for us, its objectives need to be aligned with our human goals and values in a positive and supportive way. It should recognise and complement our needs as biological and social human beings, not try to replace, suppress or ignore them.

Whilst many of the apps we use have a beneficial intent, they are invariably designed to meet the commercial goals of the businesses that created them. This often leads to a conflict with the user's overall best interest, particularly their long term health and wellbeing.

However, there are some notable exceptions. The UK NHS app '**Couch to 5k**', launched in May 2016 and downloaded over 7m times, is a 9-week plan to help people build up to running 5km, even if they have never run before. It's a great app and there are lots of benefits. Regular exercise can improve the health of your heart and lungs and reduce the risk of long-term illnesses, such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes and stroke. It can even help boost confidence too.

Disconnecting from our online devices and taking regular **digital detox rest and recovery breaks** is also an essential ingredient for our health and wellbeing. In order to function as biological animals we need to get a good night's sleep, have a good diet, exercise, and be physically connected to other people to stay healthy. And importantly, we also need time to think, to be able to understand other people and ourselves, and make sense of the world around us. But it can be difficult to know where to start and to keep motivated for long enough to create more healthy digital habits.

Taking inspiration from the UK NHS '**Couch to 5k**' app, in 2023 I created the '**digital detox couch to 5k**' – 9 weekly Digital Detox challenges which are designed to take you from sitting on the couch with your smartphone to engaging and being fully present in your favourite offline activities. Each week's challenge builds on the progress made in previous weeks.

The **digital detox couch to 5k** is completely free and is designed to be aligned with participants personal human goals.

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Before you start – Digital Detox - Self-awareness Challenge

Self-awareness of our digital habits is an important first step in being able to create a more sustainable relationship with our technology. The question to ask yourself is 'are you in control of your smartphone use, or does it exert too much control over you and how you live your life?'

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.

The first step is to think about what it is you want to achieve, what changes do you want to make and what will this enable you to do once you achieve them?

For example:

- Are you looking to feel less stressed by freeing up more time for exercise or being in nature?
- Or to be more connected and to pay more attention to the people around you?
- Or are you wanting to be more focused, productive, or creative?

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

The next step is to decide how will you make yourself accountable to keep to the '**digital detox - couch to 5k**' plan and what reward you will give yourself when you achieve it. Again, write these down with your goals.

You are now ready to start your '**digital detox – couch to 5k**' Challenge. Good luck.

Week 1 – ‘Digital Detox - Snack’ Challenge

Week one is all about getting started, figuratively speaking, to get off the couch and your smartphone and start your digital detox journey towards a healthier and more sustainable relationship with technology.

Choose a minimum of 3 days in the coming week to be your **‘digital detox - couch to 5k’** days and put them in your calendar.

Your week 1 digital detox challenge takes inspiration from Tristin Harris’ TED talks about the power of our smartphones to distract us into activities and thoughts that maybe we didn't intend to have, and getting sucked into things like social media, news, and emails, that maybe we didn't really want to do. Research has found that just by having our smartphones with us exerts an influence on our minds, and we won't necessarily be aware of it.



Choose 3 to 4 times in the day to take a **‘digital detox - snack’** challenge. These are short breaks of 10 minutes or more where you physically move to an offline environment, with no online technology close by. 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, playing with a pet or just being surrounded by nature.

If you feel the urge to run for your smartphone, try to notice what triggers that feeling.

Week 2 – ‘Digital Detox - Bookend your Sleep’ Challenge

How did you get on with taking 3 to 4 ‘**digital detox - snacks**’ during the day in week 1’s challenge?

Creating new habits takes time, even the simple ones like remembering to take regular screen time breaks. 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 on autopilot.

Week 2 continues your journey towards a healthier and more sustainable relationship with technology by creating more separation between your online activities and those that improve your health and wellbeing.



Once again choose a minimum of 3 days in the coming week to be your ‘**digital detox - couch to 5k**’ days and put them in your calendar. Building on week 1’s challenge of ‘**digital detox - snacks**’ during the day, in week 2 we will add the ‘**digital detox - bookend your sleep**’ challenge. To stay motivated, look at the goals, accountability and rewards you set in week 1.

We may think that when we go to sleep at night our brain shuts down and we just rest. That’s certainly how it feels, but we are wrong! Our brain is probably as active when we are asleep as when we are awake, performing many incredibly vital tasks for our memories and our physical and mental health. However, since we have little conscious experience of it, it’s easy to underestimate sleep’s value, and many of us don’t get enough.

It's not unusual for people to use their smartphone as an alarm clock to help them get up in the morning. However, the mere presence of our smartphones at our bedsides can impact the quality of our sleep and our mood the next day. So, the ‘**digital detox - bookend your sleep**’ challenge is designed to create more distance between your smartphone and your all-important sleep.

- 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.

If you feel the urge to run for your smartphone, try to notice what triggers that feeling.

Week 3 – ‘Digital Detox - News Media’ Challenge

How did you get on with ‘**digital detox - bookend your sleep**’ in week 2’s challenge?

Week 3 continues your journey towards a healthier and more sustainable relationship with technology by reducing the negative impact of news and social media.

Once again choose a minimum of 3 days in the coming week to be your ‘**digital detox - couch to 5k**’ days and put them in your calendar. Building on the first 2 week’s challenges, in week 3 we will add the ‘**digital detox - news media**’ challenge. To stay motivated, revisit the goals, accountability and rewards you set in week 1.



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. However, 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.

Week 3’s digital detox challenge is about choosing when, where and for how long we consume news and social media. Set yourself the target of not accessing any news or social media on your smartphone until after 9:00 am.

If you feel the urge to run for your smartphone, try to notice what triggers that feeling.

Week 4 – ‘Digital Detox - Distraction’ Challenge

How did you get on with ‘**digital detox - news media**’ in week 3’s challenge?

Week 4 continues your journey towards a healthier and more sustainable relationship with technology by giving you more control over your attention.

Once again choose a minimum of 3 days in the coming week to be your ‘**digital detox - couch to 5k**’ days and put them in your calendar. Building on the first 3 weeks challenges, in week 4 we will add the ‘**digital detox - distraction**’ challenge. To stay motivated, look at the goals, accountability and rewards you set in week 1.



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? This is because they are optimised for business objectives such as advertising revenue. 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.

Week 4’s digital detox challenge is about rethinking our smartphone use and reframing it as a useful technology tool rather than something that is always there to distract us. Choose a number of activities during your digital detox day where you want to be focussed and fully present. This could be a work activity or when you are with colleagues, family, or friends. During these activities put your smartphone out of reach and out of sight, and don’t return to it until after your activity is finished.

If you feel the urge to run for your smartphone, try to notice what triggers that feeling.

Week 5 – ‘Digital Detox - Social Media’ Challenge

How did you get on with ‘**digital detox - distraction**’ in week 4’s challenge?

Week 5 continues your journey towards a healthier and more sustainable relationship with technology by reducing the fear of missing out from social media.

Once again choose a minimum of 3 days in the coming week to be your ‘**digital detox - couch to 5k**’ days and put them in your calendar. Building on the first 4 week’s challenges, in week 5 we will add the ‘**digital detox - social media**’ challenge. To stay motivated, look at the goals, accountability and rewards you set in week 1.



For many people, social media can be like diving down a rabbit hole, as once you are 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. There is also a dark side to social media of discriminatory, hateful, trolling content and other forms of online harm particularly impacting women and children. This has prompted regulators and governments to try to hold global technology companies to greater account.

Week 5’s digital detox challenge is about creating a healthy separation between us and the world of social media, so that we can limit its influence and be more in control of our thoughts, feelings and emotions. Choose at least one of your 3 digital detox days 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.

If you feel the urge to run for your smartphone and open a social media app, try to notice what triggers that feeling.

Week 6 – ‘Digital Detox - Single Tasking’ Challenge

How did you get on with ‘**digital detox - social media**’ challenge in week 5?

We are now at week 6 of our 9 week ‘**digital detox – couch to 5k**’ challenge and you should be well on the way to being more engaged, focussed and fully present in your favourite offline activities.

Once again choose a minimum of 3 days in the coming week to be your ‘**digital detox - couch to 5k**’ days and put them in your calendar. Building on the first 5 weeks challenges, in week 6 we will add the ‘**digital detox - single tasking**’ challenge. To stay motivated, look at the goals, accountability and rewards you set in week 1.



Do you believe that you are good at multitasking? Would it surprise you to know that our brains can’t really multitask? To respond to distractions and interruptions the brain must switch tasks, and because it can do this very quickly 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, taking longer to do things, and feeling overwhelmed. Our smartphones can be very useful but the distractions they cause can easily lead to constant multitasking.

Week 6’s digital detox challenge is about single tasking for all the things you need to get done quickly and with less stress. Choose at least one of your 3 digital detox days to be your ‘**single tasking**’ day. The challenge is that for the important things that you need to do, focus on doing these single tasks for at least 40 minutes before taking a short offline break.

If you feel the urge to run for your smartphone and try to notice what triggers that feeling.

Week 7 – ‘Digital Detox - Just One Thing’ Challenge

How did you get on with ‘**digital detox - single tasking**’ challenge in week 6?

We are now at week 7 of our 9 week ‘**digital detox – couch to 5k**’ challenge and this week’s challenge is key to being able to mindfully use your smartphone and interrupt the unconscious digital habits that subvert our best intentions.

Once again choose a minimum of 3 days in the coming week to be your ‘**digital detox - couch to 5k**’ days and put them in your calendar. Building on the first 6 week’s challenges, in week 7 we will add the ‘**digital detox - just one thing**’ challenge. To stay motivated, look at the goals, accountability and rewards you set in week 1.



Smartphones are designed to nudge our behaviour by creating 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 have time to consciously think about whether this is what we 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, and set an intention to do it, before we pick up our smartphone.

Choose at least one of your 3 digital detox days to be your ‘**just one thing**’ day. The challenge is that 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 wait at least 5 minutes before doing another one thing on your smartphone.

If you find yourself doing more than one thing on your smartphone, remind yourself of the challenge and try again. If you feel the urge to do more than one thing, try to notice what triggers that feeling.

Week 8 – ‘Digital Detox - Toolbox’ Challenge

How did you get on with ‘digital detox - 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 before you have achieved your goal of being more engaging and fully present in your favourite offline activities.

Once again choose a minimum of 3 days in the coming week to be your ‘digital detox - couch to 5k’ days and put them in your calendar. Building on the first 7 weeks challenges, in week 8 we will add the ‘digital detox - toolbox’ challenge. To stay motivated, look at the goals, accountability and rewards you set in week 1.



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. The ‘digital detox - toolbox’ challenge is about changing the way we look at our smartphones, as well as technology in general, and asking ourselves 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.

Choose at least one of your 3 digital detox days to be your ‘toolbox’ day. The challenge is to place your phone in a safe place within your home or office as if it were a tool. Then get on with your day without carrying your smartphone around with you, only picking it up during the day when it is useful to you to achieve a task, before returning it.

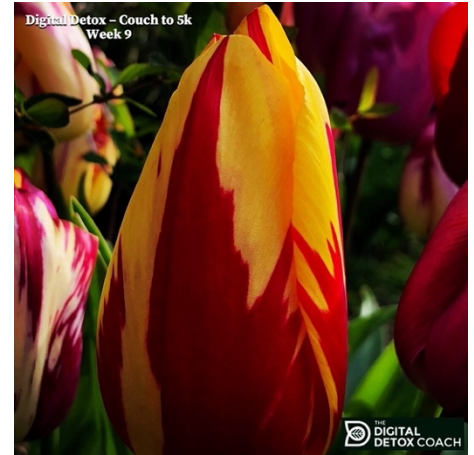
If you feel the urge to carry with you wherever you go, try to notice what triggers that feeling.

Week 9 – Digital Detox ‘In-control’ Challenge

How did you get on with Digital Detox ‘toolbox’ challenge in week 8?

We are now on the last week of our 9 week **digital detox – ‘Couch to 5k’** challenge and there is only one more challenge left before you have achieved your goal.

Once again choose a minimum of 3 days in the coming week to be your ‘**digital detox - couch to 5k**’ days and put them in your calendar. Building on the first 8 week’s challenges, this final challenge will be the ‘**digital detox - in-control**’ challenge. To stay motivated, look at the goals, accountability and rewards you set in week 1 and be very proud of yourself that you are just about to complete the ‘**digital detox – couch to 5k**’ challenge.



Choose at least one of your 3 digital detox days to be your ‘**in-control**’ day. The challenge is to forget about your smartphone for a day. By completing the challenges of the previous 8 weeks, you have all the skills you need to feel at ease without your smartphone, to be offline and be human. This challenge will leave you free to connect with other people and be fully present to experience nature and to pay attention to the real world around you.

If you feel the urge to pick up your smartphone, try to notice what triggers that feeling. And remember that creating new habits takes time, even the simple ones.

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.

Congratulations!

Please feel free to contact me on colin@TheDigitalDetoxCoach.co.uk about the best ways to digital detox and create a more healthy and sustainable relationship with technology.

Further Information

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.

Colin 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. As a coach, Colin is passionate about helping individuals and organisations achieve a healthier and more sustainable relationship with technology. He is a member of the International Coaching Federation (ICF) and holds an ICF accredited diploma in Digital Wellbeing Coaching.

He created '**The Digital Detox Coach**' in 2018, as he was fascinated by the collision between technology and psychology, and how this relationship is changing our world, our health and even the way we think. As a four times Ironman Triathlete, he also brings the mindset of an athlete into his digital wellbeing practice.

Colin is also a technologist and closely follows the latest developments in AI and other technologies that have the potential 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.

Keynote speaker and author of articles on the future of work, digital culture, sustainability, and digital detox.

- TEDx speaker: [Are We Losing our Human Identity to Technology?](#)

Colin has appeared as an expert podcast guest on many shows including:

- The ET Project with Wayne Brown *The Power of Digital Detox: Strategies for a Healthier Lifestyle* - (Apr 2024)
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Book a 30 minute [discovery call](#)

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Bonus challenges

The digital detox ‘Pause and reflect’ challenge

Here is a new digital detox challenge to add to those contained in the ‘**digital detox - couch to 5k**’. Choose a minimum of 3 days in the coming week to be your ‘**digital detox - pause and reflect**’ challenge days and put them in your calendar.

The algorithms and AI that curate our news and social media feeds and provide us with ‘personalised’ suggestions and adverts are predisposed to ensure that we will see content that evokes a strong emotional response in us, after all we’re only human. We are more highly engaged if the content makes us angry, annoyed, outraged, disgusted, sad, offended or happy. Similarly an inappropriate, unkind or just badly worded email or message will have the same effect.



Being purposeful online means using technology consciously and intentionally. It’s about understanding and managing the impact it can have on how we think, feel and behave. It is also about being able to control and balance the time we spend online with what it replaces and to know what it might be costing us. However, just as important is understanding the effect that our interactions online can have on others. We should always try to adopt the same values online that we would if the person was standing in front of us.

The ‘**digital detox - pause and reflect**’ challenge is designed to focus on what we can control, and interrupt our urge to immediately respond to highly emotional content by challenging us to delay our response for at least five minutes, to enable us time to pause and reflect. In this time we can activate our critical thinking skills to decide whether the content is fake, misleading or incomplete, and to think about whether we are being manipulated, what might the purpose be, and whether it is from a trusted source. Importantly, it will allow us time to reflect on whether we 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 we aspire to meet.

Remember that creating new habits takes time, even the simple ones.

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.
