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NEWSLETTER**

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January 2024

How to **plan for digital fatigue** before it drains you

It might be hard to plan for a lot of things this year, considering how unpredictable the world has become, but one thing you can predict is that you'll be spending a lot of time on screens and digital devices.

You can also predict that too much time on devices will drain you—mentally, emotionally and, surprisingly, physically. Digital fatigue causes problems with concentration and mood, along with headaches, and even a feeling of detachment from reality.

But although it's predictable, digital fatigue is also preventable. With the right planning and management, you can reduce the impact of digital overload. Here's how:

1. Take charge of your tech time.

While a full digital detox might seem out of reach, you can reserve no-screen time throughout your week. Create times each day when you put your phone or device away, such as an hour before bed, and carve out a good few hours on the weekend to go screen-free.

The University of Queensland conducted two studies to explore the effects of unplugging from social media for just 24 hours.

The participants reported experiencing positive emotions including happiness, carefree feelings, satisfaction, relaxation, and peace, while their negative emotions involved feelings of isolation and loneliness.

2. Apply digital mindfulness.

Ever gone to use your calculator on your smartphone, or to send a message, only to be distracted by apps? And then lose

minutes or even hours mindlessly scrolling? It's a common problem, but one that can be solved with a simple action: use mindfulness.

Become aware of when and how you use devices, just as mindfulness meditation encourages you to become aware of your mind chatter.

You can use technology to help you manage technology. A number of mindful tech apps are on the market, including One Sec, an app that gets you to take a deep breath before you open social media apps.

3. Choose off-line options.

If you need to chat to a colleague in your workplace, consider going to see them face-to-face.

An Austrian study published in *Nature* in 2023 researched the mental health of more than 400 participants over a four-week period during the pandemic lockdown. They found that people who had more face-to-face communication in their day felt better than those who had little.



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4 January is World Braille Day, observed every year since 2019 to raise awareness of the importance of Braille as a means of communication for blind and partially sighted people. For more information visit www.un.org/en/observances/braille-day

6 (easy) habits to adopt this year



New Year, new resolutions. But how long will they last? Prioritise your physical and mental health with simple habits that are easy to stick with.

1. Walk when you can. Want to get from point A to point B? If you have time (and it's safe to do so) then walk. Or walk part of the way and take public transport the rest.

Walking is underrated as a form of exercise. It can improve blood flow, strengthen your heart and immune system, build lung capacity, tone muscles, improve your sleep, increase flexibility and moderate blood pressure. And as a bonus it's free, you don't need expensive gear, and you don't need to get to and from a class.

Beyond the physical benefits, walking is surprisingly good for your brain. It's shown to strengthen your memory, reduce your risk of cognitive decline, and help reduce the symptoms of depression.

"Walking seems to facilitate the formation of new synapses, of new brain connections, and it seems to increase blood flow to the brain," Professor Tim Olds, a professor of health sciences at the University of South Australia, told smh.com.au.

Professor Olds recommends adding walking into your life whenever you can. "Walking will get you there, it will just take a bit longer."

2. Take a piece of fruit to work. We don't eat nearly enough fruit and vegetables, with only six per cent of us getting the recommended daily amount of fruit (two servings) and vegetables (five servings).

A simple way to increase your intake is to replace one snack a day with a piece of fruit or serving of vegetable. Carrot, celery, snowpeas and capsicum can all be eaten raw, and prepped and chilled beforehand.

That extra serving goes a long way. A study in the *British Medical Journal* found that for every additional serving of fruit or veg eaten daily, there is a four per cent

reduction in the risk of heart disease.

Another bonus? Fruits and vegetables are packed with fibre, which can reduce your risk of heart disease, improve your gut health, lower your cholesterol and help you lose weight.

3. Have (at least) two meat-free days a week. Eating less meat and more plant foods such as vegetables, fruit, beans, seeds and nuts, can improve heart health, decrease your risk of developing type 2 diabetes and some cancers, and help you maintain a healthy weight. Yet globally, we're eating more meat than ever.

Eating less meat also helps lower greenhouse gas emissions, with a recent UK study finding a vegetarian diet produces 59 per cent fewer emissions than a non-vegetarian one.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 14.5 per cent of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions are attributable to livestock farming (including dairy and wool



“Changes that seem small and unimportant at first will compound and turn into remarkable results if you’re willing to stick with them for years.”

James Clear, *Atomic Habits*.

production), a figure that almost equals emissions produced by the transport sector.

4. Make plans with your friends.

Reconnect with friends and turn acquaintances into friends by being the one who makes the arrangements.

Schedule regular time for a walk with a friend, try a new bar or restaurant, or ask a workmate to join you for lunch or coffee. And if you’ve no time for a physical catch-up, make a phone call.

Friendships often take a back seat to family and work obligations, says science journalist Lydia Denworth, author of *Friendship: The Evolution, Biology, and Extraordinary Power of Life’s Fundamental Bond*. But that’s a mistake, as research suggests friendships help us find purpose and meaning, stay healthy, and live longer.

“Having good, strong friendships is as important for yourself as diet and exercise, and so it’s something you need to prioritise,” says Denworth.

“You need your friends to be there down the road,” she says. “But you have to do the work along the way, or they won’t be there. Friendship does take some time, but that’s kind of good news because (mostly) hanging out with your friends is fun.”

5. Take breaks from the news. When alarming events unfold before your eyes on news channels and social media, you can end up being in a constant state of high alert.

“Doomscrolling can be addictive and amplify the tragic nature of events,” says psychotherapist Lesley Alderman, writing in the *Washington Post*.

She advises patients who are feeling depressed by the headlines to read the news just once a day, turn off alerts on their phones, and, if possible, check social media sparingly.

6. Clean between your teeth. You can use string floss, interdental brushes, or flossettes, but the important thing is to make interdental cleaning a key part of

your daily dental health routine, says the Australian Dental Association.

While various surveys show an increase of people brushing their teeth at least twice a day, far fewer report cleaning between their teeth daily.

If you don’t clean food particles and bacteria that collect in these spaces where your toothbrush can’t reach, you can develop gum disease or tooth decay, which potentially can lead to losing teeth.

Gum disease may also trigger body-wide inflammation, which plays a role in heart disease, diabetes, cancer, respiratory disease and dementia.

Is summer depression a thing?



The sun's out and everyone's posting happy summer bliss pics on socials, but you're struggling. You don't think it could be seasonal depression, because that only happens in winter doesn't it?

It turns out Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) can affect some people in summer.

But why?

Research has shown that factors like heat, longer daylight hours, and disrupted sleep patterns can trigger summer depression. A study published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders* in 2018 found that higher temperatures were associated with increased depression and anxiety symptoms. The longer daylight hours can disrupt circadian rhythms, leading to sleep disturbances and exacerbating depressive symptoms.

Likewise, a 2020 study published in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, suggests that SAD in summer may be linked to disrupted melatonin production and a lack of sensitivity to natural light.

In the Southern Hemisphere, there is the compounding stressor of the festive season in summer, when many people feel more pressure to have the 'perfect' Christmas. And if you have school children, you're dealing with extra pressures of the end of

the school year on top of everything else. Mental health issues and suicides peak in summer in the Southern Hemisphere, as they do in the Northern Hemisphere.

Dr Norman Rosenthal, a psychiatrist at Georgetown University School of Medicine, first described SAD in 1984. He is author of the book, *Defeating SAD: A Guide to Health and Happiness Through All Seasons*.

"Summer SAD certainly exists and can be both severe and dangerous since the mix of depression and agitation may go along with suicidal ideas and behaviour," says Dr Rosenthal.

What is Summer SAD?

Summer depression, or "summer-onset depression", or "reverse SAD" is a subtype of major depressive disorder.

It occurs in people who display no other mental health symptoms or issues throughout the year. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, SAD isn't a separate disorder but is a type of depression that reoccurs in certain seasons, generally lasting about four to five months per year.

Dr Norman Rosenthal says that while winter SAD often makes people feel slow and lethargic, summer SAD can trigger feelings of agitation.

What are the signs of summer depression?

The symptoms of SAD in summer affect different people in different ways, but the common signs to watch for include:

- sleeping less
- feeling overactivated and agitated
- having decreased appetite
- having more suicidal ideas
- being bothered by heat and/or light.

If you think you may be suffering from summer SAD, talk to your health care provider. They may give you a questionnaire to see if your symptoms match SAD, and they can talk with you about ways to manage it.

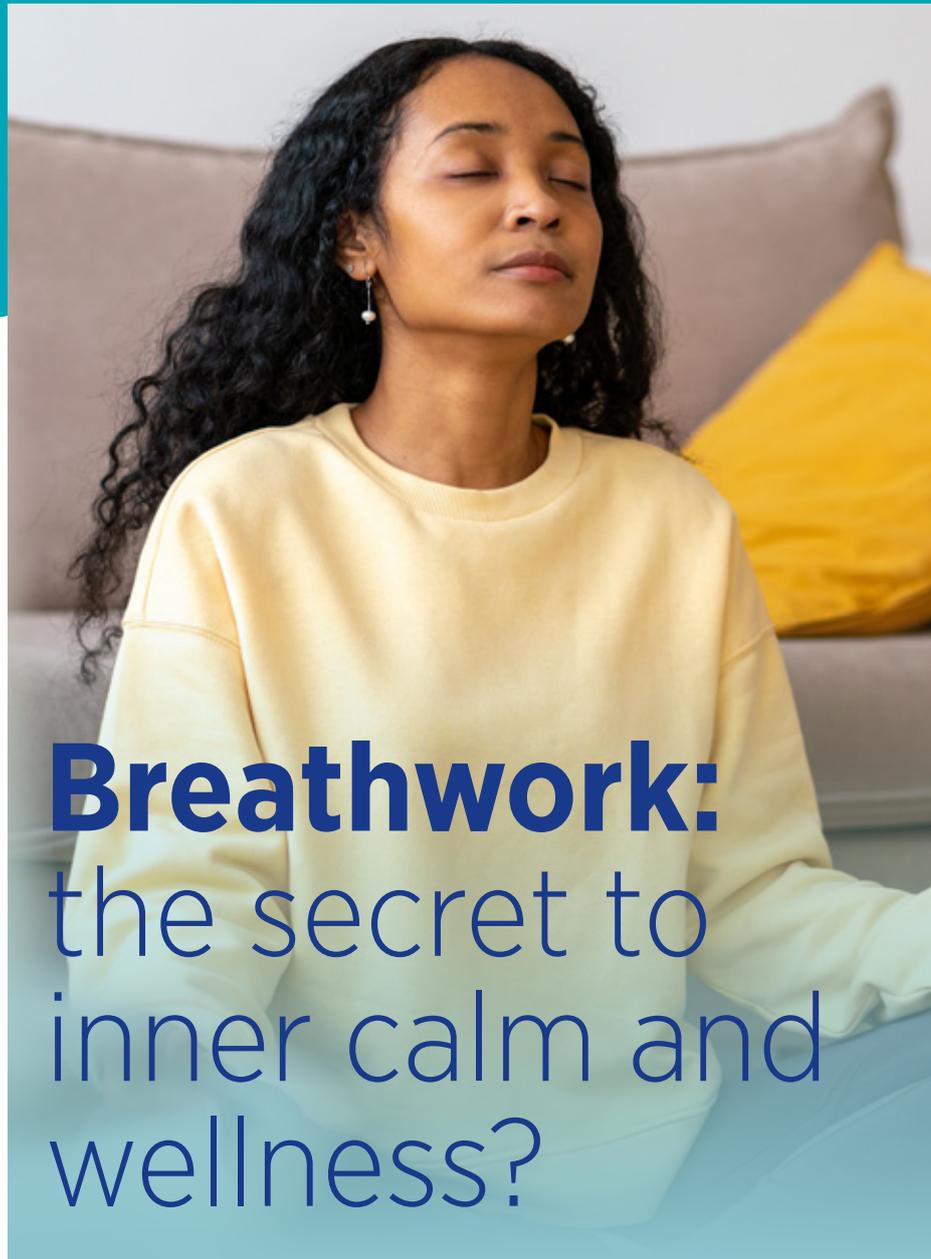
What can I do about it?

The most important step is to get help. Regardless of the time of year, if you're feeling depressed it's a good idea to get yourself connected to support early. Speak to your doctor about a mental health care plan, or book an appointment with a trusted mental health professional.

Summer depression can also benefit from a multifaceted approach. Dr. Rosenthal recommends cooling yourself with regular cold showers or baths, turning down the thermostat on your air conditioner, and keeping curtains drawn in the heat of the day.

WayAhead, the Mental Health Association of NSW, says treatment can include light therapy, medication if necessary and psychotherapy.

Light therapy, or phototherapy, requires sitting a few metres from a special light that exposes you to bright light. This can change brain chemicals that are linked to mood. While it's generally used for winter SAD, it can also be adjusted to work for Summer SAD. You'll need to discuss it with your doctor first.



Breathwork: the secret to inner calm and wellness?

We all breathe, around 22,000 times a day. Yet research is increasingly showing that intentionally managing our breath can bring physical and mental health benefits.

Breathwork refers to deep, diaphragmatic breathing or belly breathing. According to a 2017 study published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, breathwork can trigger relaxation responses in the body.

A further systematic review published in *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* in 2018 found that breathwork reduces anxiety, sharpens memory, treats symptoms of depression, promotes more restful sleep, and even improves heart health.

The science behind breathwork

While it might seem “alternative”, breathwork is rooted in science. Our breath is directly linked to our autonomic nervous system, which controls our body’s involuntary

functions such as heart rate and blood pressure. By manipulating our breath, we can influence our physical and mental states.

Research has shown that conscious control of the breath can trigger the relaxation response. Think of it as your body’s natural chill pill. When you engage in deep, diaphragmatic breathing, it activates the parasympathetic nervous system, reducing stress hormones, lowering heart rate, and relaxing muscles.

Moreover, breathwork can improve oxygen uptake, which benefits every cell in your body. Proper oxygenation enhances energy levels, boosts mental clarity, and supports the body’s natural healing processes. It’s like a reset button for your entire system.

The proven benefits of breathwork

1. Stress reduction: As mentioned earlier, breathwork can help lower stress levels by reducing cortisol production. Practising deep, deliberate breaths can be a lifesaver during high-pressure situations.

How to do it

Here’s a simple method to get you started:

1. Relax: Get comfortable, whether sitting or lying. Close your eyes and take a moment to let go of tension in your body.

2. Begin with deep breaths: Take a deep breath in through your nose, expanding your belly. Then exhale slowly through your mouth, releasing all the air. This helps you to get in tune with your breath.

3. Count your breaths: Once you’re comfortable, start counting your breaths. Inhale for a count of four, hold for a count of four, exhale for a count of four, and hold for a count of four. This pattern is known as the “4-4-4-4” technique.

4. Repeat: Continue this cycle for a couple of minutes, gradually extending your practice as you become more comfortable with the technique.

5. Observe: Throughout your breathwork session, pay attention to the sensations in your body and the calming effects on your mind.

As you become more experienced with breathwork, you can explore other techniques like the Wim Hof Method, box breathing, or alternate nostril breathing. The key is to find a method that resonates with you and complements your goals, whether it’s relaxation, increased focus, or emotional balance.

“Think of breathwork as your body’s natural chill pill.”

2. Enhanced mental clarity: When you oxygenate your brain, it functions better. You’ll experience improved focus, creativity, and mental sharpness.

3. Emotional regulation: Breathwork can help you respond more calmly to challenging situations and reduce anxiety.

4. Better sleep: Deep breathing exercises before bedtime can relax your body and mind, making it easier to fall asleep and enjoy more restorative sleep.

5. Physical wellness: Breathwork can improve cardiovascular health, strengthen the immune system, and aid in digestion. It’s a natural way to boost your overall well-being.

Keep safe in the heat

Whether you work outdoors or indoors in a hot environment, working in heat is a hazard that can result in severe health problems. And when it's hot weather outside, it's something we all should be aware of.

If your body has to work too hard to keep cool, it starts to overheat. This can lead to heat-related illness, says SafeWork NSW, a term that describes a range of conditions such as dehydration, fainting, heat rash, heat cramps, heat exhaustion, and the life-threatening condition, heatstroke.

Working in a hot environment can also lead to other health and safety injuries because a worker can become fatigued in the heat, feel physically weak, have slower reaction times and develop poor judgement.

What you can do

1. Make sure you have access to cool water. Whether you're working indoors or

out, drink small amounts often rather than large amounts every now and then, says SafeWork NSW. Don't rely on soft drinks, energy drinks or coffee—water is the best fluid for rehydrating. If you're sweating a lot for prolonged periods, then an electrolyte sports drink may be helpful.

2. Take regular breaks to stay cool. This may mean taking longer breaks more often as the temperature rises. If you're working outside, make sure your breaks are taken under shade. If inside in a hot environment, move to an air-conditioned area if possible.

3. Wear appropriate clothing. Outside, this means suitable sun-safe clothing to protect

you against ultraviolet radiation when UV levels are above 3. This includes trousers, a shirt with a collar and long sleeves, and a wide-brimmed bucket or legionnaire style hat, all made of fabric with an ultraviolet protection factor (UPF) rating of 50+. Apply broad-spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen with an SPF of 30+ or higher to any unprotected skin.

4. Know the symptoms of heat-related illness. These include slurred speech, paleness, dizziness, nausea, loss of concentration and confusion, and require immediate medical attention.



Ask an expert about ...

Q. Are you drinking enough water?

The amount of water you need to drink each day will change, says Kidney Health Australia. You'll need to drink more if it's a hot day, if you're exercising, if you're ill with fever, vomiting and diarrhoea, or pregnant or breastfeeding.

Dehydration means your body doesn't have enough water and being thirsty is often a sign that you're already dehydrated.

How often you go to the toilet and the colour of your urine (wee) is also a good way to tell if your body is getting enough

water. Pale yellow urine means you're hydrated, but if it's dark yellow you're dehydrated and should drink more water.

Other signs of dehydration include:

- a dry mouth, lips and tongue
- dry nasal passages
- feeling dizzy or weak
- headache
- fatigue
- slow reaction times or confusion.

If you're showing early signs of dehydration, Kidney Health Australia recommends you:

- stop what you're doing and if outside, find some shade
- splash yourself with water and put a cool, wet cloth on your face and neck
- drink water slowly, small sips at a time.

If you don't feel better within half an hour or have other symptoms such as not being able to pass urine, vomiting or cramping, see a doctor or go to hospital immediately.

For more information visit [kidney.org.au](https://www.kidney.org.au)

App of the month

Everyday.

One of the simplest habit tracker apps, the core concept of Everyday is to perform habits daily, and to not break the chain or streak. Doing something every day allows it to become a habit, and habits are what allow you to reach your goals. If you perform a habit, you mark it as done (such as 'do 10 push-ups' or 'learn 5 French words'). On the right of the screen, you see how long your current streak is, as well as the previous high score of your streak and a total count of times you performed a habit in its lifetime, which allows you to see which habits you regularly achieve, and which you are struggling to do.

Available free with in-app purchases from the [App Store](#) and [Google Play](#).

Online course to stop you worrying

An online course can help you reduce the time you spend ruminating and worrying, found a recent study from UNSW Sydney. Soon to be hosted on the government funded online clinic This Way Up, the course was found to significantly improve the mental health of the people who participated in the study.

The Managing Rumination and Worry Program aims to help people reduce their levels of rumination, which is dwelling on past negative experiences, and worry, which is thinking over and over about bad things happening in future.

"Out of all the research we've done on online therapies, this is by far the most popular program," says Professor Jill Newby, clinical psychologist with UNSW's School of Psychology and the affiliated Black Dog Institute.

"We've known for years now that online programs can help improve mental health. But this is one of the first that specifically focuses on rumination and worry."

Eighty per cent of the participants who did the online course reported significantly lower levels of repetitive negative thoughts, depression and distress immediately following the course, and at the three-month follow-up.

To find out more about all the online courses run at This Way Up, visit thiswayup.org.au

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News Bites



Does your Zoom background affect your image?

Want to make a good impression on Zoom? Then smile and consider your background, say researchers from Durham University, UK, whose study was published in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

The team asked people to rate the trustworthiness and competence of virtual meeting screenshots showing a man or woman against a backdrop featuring a living space, a blurred living space, houseplants, a bookcase, a blank wall, or a novelty picture of a walrus on an iceberg.

They found that faces with houseplant and bookcase backgrounds were rated more trustworthy and competent than with other backgrounds.

Happy and female faces were also seen as more trustworthy and competent than neutral or male faces.

While more research is needed to confirm these findings, they do suggest that videoconference users who want to make a good impression might smile and choose a background with houseplants or a bookcase.

Sit less and reduce dementia risk

People who sit for long hours at work and home are at much higher risk of developing dementia than people who sit less, says a study published in *JAMA*. Even those people who exercise regularly face higher risk if they sit for much of the day, found the researchers.

The study involved nearly 50,000 men and women aged 60 or older, many of whom wore a sophisticated activity tracker for one week.

If the men and women sat for at least 10 hours a day, their risk of developing dementia within the next seven years was eight per cent higher than if they sat for fewer than 10 hours. And the risks increased for those who were less active, reaching a 63 per cent greater risk of dementia for people who were sitting for at least 12 hours.

And surprisingly, people who exercised but then sat for 10 hours or more were as prone to dementia as those who hadn't exercised much at all. What ultimately mattered was how many hours in total a person spent in a chair on most days.

1

THING YOU CAN DO TODAY



Get up at the same time each day

Do you find getting up on Mondays the hardest? Do you often find yourself struggling to open your eyes in the morning?

If so, it might be time to consider the powerful benefits of going to bed and getting up at the same time each day.

The thought of losing your weekend sleep-in can at first seem horrifying, but soon you'll discover how much better you feel every day when you stick to a routine.

Maintaining a consistent sleep schedule helps regulate your body's internal clock, known as your circadian rhythm. This natural rhythm controls crucial functions like sleep, appetite, and body temperature. When you follow a consistent schedule, your body learns when to release sleep-inducing hormones and when to wake up feeling refreshed.

Psychology Today says sleeping on a consistent schedule is one of the healthiest and most important sleep habits you can have.

"Consistency helps us avoid piling up a sleep debt, and can offer protection against a range of health conditions, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol and high blood sugar."

It also affects your mental health. Irregular sleep is a risk factor for depression, according to *Psychology Today*.

Getting up at the same time every morning can also be an effective way to deal with social jetlag: the gap between your natural circadian rhythm and your actual real-life schedule. It's caused by late nights on weekends and early mornings during the week.

EAT SMARTER

Cherries

Whether you prefer sweet or tart varieties, these tiny fruits are bursting with goodness that goes beyond their delicious flavour.

Cherries are packed with antioxidants, particularly anthocyanins, which give them their vibrant red hue. These antioxidants help combat oxidative stress, reduce inflammation, and may lower the risk of chronic diseases, including heart disease and certain cancers. Plus, cherries are a fantastic source of vitamin C, which boosts your immune system and supports healthy skin.

But the cherry on top is their sleep-enhancing quality. Tart cherries, which are a lighter red in colour, are a natural source of melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep patterns. Eating tart cherries or drinking tart cherry juice helps some people improve their sleep quality and duration, making them a perfect bedtime snack.

Research has even found that tart cherries can reduce muscle soreness. Research published in the *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports* found that marathoners consuming tart cherry juice five days before, on the day of, and 48 hours following their races experienced reduced muscle soreness.

Cherries also contain fibre, promoting digestive health, and potassium, which helps regulate blood pressure.

So, next time you're craving a snack, grab a handful of cherries and relish both their mouth-watering taste and the numerous health benefits they provide.




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