

BLOG

# Beat the burnout

OPINION

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## Bianca Best, Managing Director of MediaCom's BLINK innovation division, examines the cognitive impact of digital overload and offers a five-step route to digital wellness

In June 2019 the World Health Organisation classified burnout as a global epidemic. In Great Britain, one in four of us will suffer a mental dis-order this year – be it depression, anxiety, alcohol dependency or similar. It's estimated that the global economy loses \$1trillion per year in lost productivity due to unanticipated absences and up to 90% of healthcare costs in Western countries are lifestyle based and thus preventable.

The fourth industrial revolution, where technology thrusts change as the absolute constant, has catapulted us into crisis. There are four stages to burnout. Firstly, a sense of physical,

mental or emotional exhaustion gently descends. At this point, you're probably still holding it all together at work. Then comes a pervading sense of shame and doubt; "Why am I not coping? Why does this feel so hard?"

Next, cynicism and callousness erupt as we start to blame the world and extrinsic factors. Until finally failure and helplessness thwart us semi-permanently in our tracks. At this point the excessive and prolonged stress hit like a sledgehammer causing immune collapse, mental breakdown and emotional fog. You stop being able to function.

What's causing all this turmoil? We exist in an era of unprecedented stimulation. Ninety per cent of the data in the world has been created in the last two years alone. The average Westerner is exposed to 5,000 ads per day and receives an average of 85 notifications on their mobile device per day. And we're still speeding up.

It's no wonder our senses are feeling overwhelmed. Brands, retailers, businesses, news channels, social media – it's all ping, ping, beep, beep, flash, flash as we're assailed by endless attention grabbers.

The impact on the human brain of perpetual digital assault is a tendency to become passive as we wait for the next notification, the next stimulus, to provoke action. We're losing the ability to think, to filter and focus. Concentrated attention remains the surest route to quality output as Daniel Goleman explores in his prescriptive bestseller, *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*, where he asserts that focus is key for human, organisational and planetary flourishing. We simply can't excel at anything without deep focus. It's just plain fact.

So how do we combat the endless stimulus and become more selective in what we consume? It's easy once you stop being a passenger on this digital roller-coaster and take back control.

Most of our consumption today happens through our devices and screens. In the marketing industry, an entire science has emerged examining how to effectively target consumers through multiple screens simultaneously – TV, desktop, lap-top, tablet, mobile and so on.

Who doesn't gaze at their phone last thing at night before sleep, and first thing on waking up in the morning?

Futurists predict screen technology will evolve further still with holograms and augmented reality headsets enabling even the kitchen to become a screen. Car windows are already being used as screens in the latest models gliding off the factory line. Screens are all-pervasive and we urgently need to manage how we personally digest what's on them.

## MY ESSENTIAL STEPS TO DIGITAL WELLNESS:

### 01. Turn off notifications

With our device management, there's a simple fix: turn off the notifications. That is one easy shift you can make that immediately halts your dopamine-inducing addiction to 'Ooh another Instagram like!' Go into 'Settings' and just turn them off. You don't need to read every message as it comes in. Wait until you're ready to access messages and digest them en masse.

### 02. Start your day proactively without digital distraction

Make the first hour of every day free from digital invasion. Use this sacred time to direct your thoughts and attention where they will be most useful. The most productive time for our brains is just after waking, as the prefrontal cortex is most active. In this fresh state, we're better at focusing attention, bouts of creative writing and effective learning. This is why many successful CEOs work from home for the first few hours of the day. Be a CEO yourself, make the most of those excellent brain waves while they're bounding around energetically, plan your day, do the important stuff and focus.

### 03. Beware the blue light at night

Avoid screens as you wind down before sleep (and start to view sleep as the 'start' of your day!). Our devices emit light of all colours, but it's the blues in particular that pose a danger to sleep. Blue light prevents the release of melatonin, a hormone associated with night-time

tranquillity that reduces alertness and makes sleep more inviting. Halting production of melatonin means you're inhibiting your gentle descent into slumber. Leave your phone downstairs or if you have it by the bed, ensure it's in aeroplane mode whilst you sleep.

#### 04. Become conscious of your social media habits

Social media can be as harmful as it is entertaining. Get context before you weep into your pillow at night, lamenting your lack of life success compared with those Insta beauties who are young, fit, drunk yet bright-eyed, have immaculate homes yet work full time, whose kids are adorable despite being raised by staff, etc. Get perspective, and if shiny social media perfection upsets you, well, don't look at it. Identify if it's serving you well, and if it inspires you, connects you to your community or brings out your best self in some way, fantastic. If not, and you recognise that it is limiting your life contribution in some way, then modify your engagement with it. Either way, remember life success and happiness centre around choices and consequences. What do you choose?

#### 05. Plan in digital-free time

Manage your time, focus and free-flowing creative state by carving out space in your schedule to digitally detox. Whether a morn-ing meditation, an afternoon run or a walking meeting in the park, build in daily habits comprising digital-free time. Create screen-free zones in your home (my bed-room is my digital-free sanctuary). Plan hobbies that don't involve tech, get old school and creative. Rediscover your inner child. Detach from digital dependency.

Digital wellness is attainable for each and every one of us. It can be achieved as a way of life once we consciously stop passivity. Once we embrace technology by purposefully integrating body, mind and spirit to live more fully within the human, natural and digital communities we can make strides to eliminate burnout for good.

#### OPINION

