

Healthy Tech Habits: Practise Safe Tech

Technology is vital to everyday tasks, but our dependence on technology can turn into a habit that impacts productivity during school and work days.

Email overload, a term first coined by Whittaker and Sidner in 1996, has grown exponentially in the last decade. Research on this issue suggests the stress of dealing with over-stuffed inboxes shortens our breath, speeds our hearts and spikes our blood pressure—often without us noticing. Long-term stress associated with technology use can lead to teeth grinding, diabetes, heart disease and depression (Save, 2020).

Much of our technology use is habitual and tends to be semi-conscious or unconscious. Schoolwork is often not to blame. Instead, technology stress arises mainly from the urgency we feel to keep tabs on our ever-expanding virtual social lives. This might be tied to 'FOMO' (fear of missing out).

Technology doesn't have to rule your life if you:

- **Learn to focus your attention intentionally: What do I need to do at this moment?**
- **Learn to make technology work for you, not against you.**

The following tips will help you use technology in a healthy way:

Work within your attention span

Before we talk about technology, it's important to know your own attention span. With all the fun distractions and games available in the digital age, is it any wonder that many students find it difficult to focus attention for long periods of time?

Rather than becoming frustrated about lack of focus, learn to work within the limits of your attention span.

First, find the limits of your attention for a particular task or subject. Can you stay focused for 10 minutes? What about 20 minutes? Try setting a regular five-minute timer, and when it goes off, ask yourself if you're still engaged in the task. Mark down when your attention begins to wane.

Once you've established your attention span for a course, divide your coursework into similarly timed chunks.

Example: You have about a 30-minute attention span for working on a case study in your Commerce class. Divide the project into reading the assignment for 30 minutes, then finding three important research articles in 30 minutes, etc.

Take five-minute breaks between work sessions.

Use a timer to keep you on track during your working sessions and your breaks. You can set up your phone to help you, or use an online timer.

Tip: Do your hardest work (the most difficult or boring stuff) at the time of day when you're most alert.

Use of technology during study sessions

You can improve focus during study sessions by simply removing unnecessary technology from your workspace. Ask yourself, '**Do I need my phone or computer *right now for this work?***'

Remember those five-minute breaks we mentioned earlier?



If you want to check your phone or email during a break, remember to time yourself so you don't get lost in a digital 'rabbit hole'—but feel free to check your texts, guilt-free, on your five-minute break! Try to alternate breaks between physical activity (going for a walk, stretching) and using technology (checking your phone) so that you have a chance to recharge physically, too.

When the break is over, look back at the above diagram. If your device is not necessary, turn it off and put it out of sight.

Analyze your work area

Do you have a place where you can study/work uninterrupted (other than for scheduled breaks)?

Is everything you need (e.g. supplies, water, snacks) nearby?

Are you comfortable (but not too comfortable)? Think 'good lighting and comfortable chair.'

Don't study/work on your bed; it will make you sleepy!

Where are your devices? (If you don't need them, have you left them at home or put them away?)

Tips for making your work area distraction-free

Turn off technology

- This includes your phone, iPod and wireless connection.
- If you need to be online to complete your work, block distracting pages or use software to help you (see our [list of online tools](#)).
- Put everything you do not need (phone, music) out of sight.

Set specific times to check texts and emails

- When you're working, check your phone and email only at specific times during the day, such as after breakfast, lunch and dinner.
- Set a timer to remind yourself to return to work.
- You may want to combine your email check with your planner check.
- Let friends and family know you're busy with school and that you'll only be in contact at certain times of day.
- **Think of it this way:** Before the invention of email and cellphones, people were only expected to check their mailbox once a day! Perhaps you, too, can begin the habit of checking your digital 'mailboxes' at two to three scheduled times a day.

Use white noise to minimize distractions

White noise is a sound that covers up other sounds. Muting or muffling other noises can help with sleep, concentration and stress. There are lots of apps that can help. Here are some examples:

- [TMSOFT's White Noise Web Player](#)
- [SimplyNoise](#)

Or simply search 'noise generator' and choose one that suits you.

Distraction pad

Use a piece of paper while you work to write down wandering thoughts and to-do items, like, 'Have I received that important email yet?' or 'Will I remember to text my friend later about going out?'

Getting distracting thoughts out of your head by writing them down can help you focus on the task at hand. You can always get to the to-do items later.

- Set aside a specific time each evening to review what you've written down.
- Some items may be trivial and can be forgotten.
- Some items may be important; turn these into specific actions and add them to your to-do list.
- Discuss ongoing, distressing thoughts with someone.
- Alternatively, keep a running tally of when you find yourself getting distracted.
- If you notice yourself off task, make a check.
- Drawing attention to off-task thoughts and behaviour in a concrete way can help you avoid them.
- Look for patterns. Do your thoughts wander when you're tired? Hungry? Restless? Worried?
- Focus on positive health habits and talk to someone if you're worried about school, work, etc.

Engage with your work

It's much easier to maintain intense focus if you're interested in the task at hand! (This is why a five-minute visit to Twitter can unexpectedly turn into an hour of fascinating articles.)

You may be able to harness this concentration by getting interested in your courses. Active studying can improve your concentration and the quality of your studying.

- Ask yourself questions.
- Relate the information to your personal experience.

- Think about the real-world implications.
- Make up your own examples.

Examples:

- This reminds me of.....
- This is similar to what I learned in my other class.....
- I wonder what would happen if.....

Study/work with a friend

Sometimes, students find it useful to have someone else around to help them stay on task and avoid distractions. It may not be possible to get together with your friends for in-person study sessions right now due to the pandemic, but you can still use technology to study together with them virtually.

Just seeing a friend working can be a great way to stay focused and accountable. If someone gets distracted, the other person can gently remind them that they're there to study for their midterm or complete their project.

During weekly check-ins, stay accountable for your progress by telling each other what you've done over the week, and what you want to accomplish next week.

The key is to use your time wisely!

Use self-talk to stay on task

Positive self-talk is one of the most powerful tools you can use to get started and stay on track. Athletes use it to help them do their best; it can also help you with your academic performance!

Self-talk is all about using positive language to recognize your good work and encourage yourself to work better. It's pretty simple to do, but it takes some practice to use it effectively. Consider congratulating yourself for staying on track with a project, or reminding yourself where you need to focus your attention.

Over time, you can develop a self-talk habit that keeps you motivated and focused.

Examples:

- If I get started now, I will feel less stressed later in the term.
- I'm really making progress on this paper.
- I have been on task for 10 minutes without distraction.
- I have now completed the most important part of this task.

Online tools to help you stay focused

Technology isn't a bad thing; it's how we use it that matters. In fact, there are lots of online tools that can help you stay on task.

Web site blockers

As the name suggests, these are tools (e.g. apps or software) that let you block websites, games, social media, etc. as needed. Many of these use the 'Pomodoro Technique,' a time-management system that uses a timer to chunk work into intervals (usually 25 minutes) that are separated by short breaks. This technique has been around since the 1980s! Here are some examples:

- [Leechblock](#)

Like several of the site blockers listed below, Leechblock lets you block sites for fixed time periods (or combination). Leechblock works with Mozilla Firefox, Chrome, Edge, and others such as Brave, Opera, and Vivaldi. **This is a free productivity tool!**

- [FocusMe](#)

FocusMe is a time management app that works by scheduling access to sites you may visit as a distraction. It works with Windows and Macs. You can sign up for a 14-day free trial, but after that, your costs are (\$US):

- \$5.99/month
- \$39.99/year
- Unlimited/lifetime access: \$149.99

- [Cold Turkey](#)

Cold Turkey allows you to block websites, social media and games temporarily so you can focus on your work. It works across any web browser (e.g. Chrome, Safari), as well as Windows and Macs. The basic version is free, while the Pro version is a one-time purchase of CAD\$49 (tax included).

- [Focus@Will](#)

Similar to 'white noise' platforms, this subscription service plays music while you work. Focus@Will claims its service can help the average listener stay focused 400 per cent longer than usual. It's Windows- and Mac-compatible and it has a free seven-day trial. Subscription costs start at US\$35/year.

- [Focusbooster](#)

Focusbooster uses the Pomodoro Technique to help you set goals for work sessions. It tracks time on tasks and provides you feedback on your efforts. There is a limited feature-free version, with full versions starting at US\$2.99/month. Focusbooster is Windows- and Mac-compatible.

- [Freedom](#)

Freedom is multi-platform compatible; it helps productivity by preventing you from accessing any part of the Web for up to eight hours. Freedom has a seven-day free trial, with monthly plans starting at just under US\$3.

This is not an exhaustive list. If these don't spark your interest, simply search for 'productivity tools.' There are numerous options ranging from free to subscription-based.

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References

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