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P.80

LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA
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Pop Biz

POWERING DOWN

COMPANIES ARE FINDING NEW WAYS TO HELP CUT THE POWER CORDS THAT BIND US TO OUR DEVICES—AND RETURN US TO OURSELVES. BY SARAH ELBERT



When was the last time you watched the evening news—or caught up on *The Americans*, or went for a walk or attended a staff meeting—and didn't have your smartphone in your pocket, on the table or in your hand? For many of us, our phones

are extensions of ourselves, a digital appendage that's never far away and itches naggingly with every new-email-alert vibration or notification.

This is a cultural change that has happened quickly: The Pew Research Center reported that a year ago, 68 percent of adults owned a smartphone (86 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds)—up from 35 percent in 2011. And those numbers

have likely risen since October 2015. What's more, we may actually use our smartphones way more than we think we do; a study by British researchers following a group of young adults showed that they checked their phones an average of 85 times a day—or about double what the smartphone users themselves had estimated.

The long-term effects of our digital

compulsions aren't fully known, though studies have shown that internet/gaming/tech addiction can affect the brain in much the same way that drugs do—and can contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease, attention-deficit disorder, decreased empathy and more.

In a recent *New York* magazine cover story, writer Andrew Sullivan detailed his own struggle with tech addiction: "My dreams were filled with the snippets of code I used each day to update the site. My friendships had atrophied as my time away from the web dwindled. My doctor, dispensing one more course of antibiotics, finally laid it on the line: 'Did you really survive HIV to die of the web?'"

Thankfully, most of us haven't reached that point, but with our faces buried in our tiny screens, human interactions have certainly declined—whether it's with strangers on the train or our loved ones at home. How many

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— JESS DAVIS, FOUNDER OF FOLK REBELLION

people feel a sense of annoyance rather than anticipation when our phones actually do what they were originally intended to do: ring?

But there's a movement afoot to loosen our grip on technology. A growing number of companies are organizing "tech fast" trips or retreats, meant to help us unplug and reconnect with ourselves, each other and the world (though

you can head to many destinations—Cuba, the Galapagos, Alaska—and you won't have a choice, since cell and internet service is spotty or unavailable). Among the offerings:

- Intrepid Travel has a new collection of screen-free getaways to locations such as India and Morocco that require you to pledge not to use phones, social media or cameras.

- A company called Digital Detox, which bills itself as the "ultimate decelerator," organizes off-the-grid Camp Grounded retreats around the United States, where participants hand in their phones in exchange for yoga, hiking, meditation, workshops and locally sourced, sustainable meals.

- This winter, you can head to Northern Canada to ogle the aurora borealis and escape the digital cacophony in nature, a trip organized by a company called Folk Rebellion, which promotes its crusade for a

return to offline living via corporate speaking engagements, columns, retreats, the sale of old-school products such as alarm clocks and notepads, and a line of graphic clothing that's sold at Urban Outfitters and other locations.

Jess Davis, founder of Brooklyn-based Folk Rebellion, was a digital brand strategist who began to suffer from symptoms such as lethargy and brain fog that a series of specialists—from doctors to holistic practitioners to nutritionists—couldn't diagnose or cure. It wasn't until Davis went on a family vacation to Hawaii and her husband made her hand over her devices that the fog began to lift.

"On the eighth day, I woke up and it was the most naturally I had woken up in decades. With the smell of the ocean outside, I just sat up and I felt amazing. It was this big 'aha' moment," she says. "I was burned out, and I believe it was from overcommunication and always being

on, never really giving myself a rest."

Davis returned from Hawaii and was in her first meeting at work when she realized that her full-time job was going to send her right back to where she'd started before vacation. So she quit. Just like that.

Most of these "tech rebels," including Davis and Digital Detox founder Levi Felix, say they're not antitechnology but are looking at ways of incorporating technology into our daily lives that don't suck quite as much life out of us. Like instituting set times for replying to work emails, for example, rather than just always responding to emails.

Likewise, other companies are creating new tools to help us manage our digital intake. Apps such as Moment (iOS) and AppDetox (Android) let users track and manage their smartphone use according to their own set limits. London-based Vinaya, in addition to conducting research on the effects of technology

on our brains and behavior, creates striking jewelry that vibrates when you get messages or calls from your personal VIPs, curating a tether to your smartphone and theoretically allowing you to relax a little bit.

"Our vision is a future where technology, of course, touches ever waking moment, but does so in a way that doesn't detract from human evolution; a future where technology is invisible, like oxygen—oxygen is ever present, but yet we don't think about it," says Vinaya founder Kate Unsworth, who was previously a management consultant but had started to feel as if technology was taking over.

"I was spending time with people face to face and I wasn't really present," Unsworth says. "We wanted to create technology that is seamlessly integrated into users' lives," allowing them to stay connected without being distracted. ▼

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