

➤ If you're still not convinced that you too could benefit from detaching yourself from your computer, it's worth bearing in mind the huge advantages of taking time to enjoy living in the present. Mindfulness is a psychology buzzword coined to describe techniques which help us simply be in the moment. The idea behind it is to stop doing (or tweeting about it) and focus on being (just enjoying the environment you're currently in – be it a beach or your sofa).

TWEET OFF

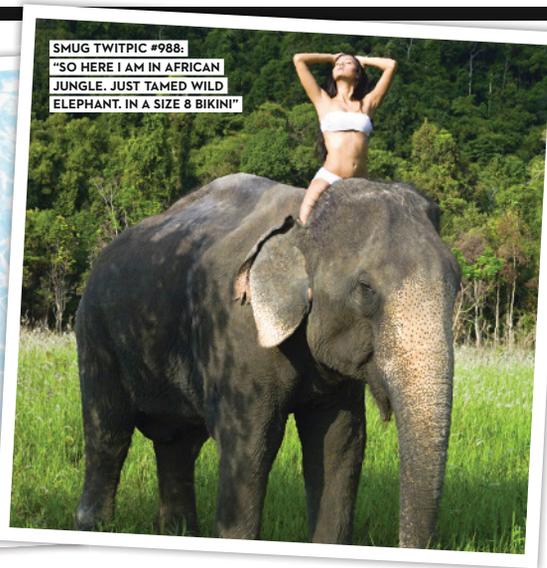
A recent study published in *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* tracked people who practised focusing their attention on just one thing for 30 minutes a day. MRI scans found it changed their brain structure – reducing the area that affects stress and fear and boosting the areas of the brain involved in learning, memory, empathy and compassion. The benefits go on. Studies show focusing on one thing or activity reduces stress, boosts immune function, lowers blood pressure and reduces chronic pain. People who live in the present have been found to be happier, more empathic and have higher self-esteem.

Psychotherapist Katrina Pitts isn't surprised at the findings, "The process of constantly tweeting means you leap straight from the 'experience' stage of something fun to the 'doing' stage of tweeting about it, without the important 'reflective' stage in-between. It's that stage that gives us mindfulness to truly enjoy the moment."

But how do you truly achieve mindfulness in the 21st century? "Show up for your life every day," says Michael Chaskalson. "Regularly ask yourself, what's happening around me right now that I'm missing? One good way to do this is to concentrate purely on one sense: ask what I can feel right now, what can I hear right now, what can I taste right now, what can I smell right now, what can I see?"

Another way to plunge yourself headfirst into the present is by regularly giving yourself a reality check. Every time you whip out your mobile or laptop ask yourself if what you are doing would be normal if the people you're doing it with electronically were in the room.

"If you went on a first date and took your best friend people would think you were very strange, but if you're



texting them that's what's happening," says Yaverbaum. And take time to consider what you're getting out of all those Facebook and Twitter relationships. Next time you're multi-tasking, ask yourself what I am getting from this? If it's laughter, support or knowledge, continue. If it's just killing time then de-tech. After all, if you were at a party and you got stuck in a corner with someone who bored you, you'd make your excuses and leave.

"We are using technology to conduct our relationships, and so it needs to be treated like relationships," says Dr Nerina Ramlakhan author of *Tired But Wired: How To Overcome Your Sleep Problems*.

ENJOY THE SILENCE

But experts agree the only true way to unplug yourself and start enjoying each activity to its full potential is to strengthen your 'mindfulness' neurons. Your ability to focus is like a muscle, you need to exercise it to build it. "So, every day, practise focus, it could just be the view out of the window, for five minutes. Alidina says, "After 30 seconds you're going to feel bored, but notice that then let it go. Every time you do that you're strengthening that neural connection."

Perhaps one of the most useful places to practise mindfulness is at work. Since the inception of email, Twitter and Skype, office life is so centred around multi-tasking, it's almost impossible to concentrate on any one thing so try following mindfulness rules. For example, when doing tasks, block out time to focus on similar things. If you're planning, don't attend to any other tasks during this time. And try breathing practices throughout the day, checking to see if you are in a proactive, reactive, distracted or waste zone. Then choose what is the most important thing to be doing right now.

It goes without saying that huge positives come out of technology, such as keeping in touch with friends all over the world via Facebook, and it's a huge privilege to have such a wealth of information at our fingertips. But every so often it's time to unplug. While there's no denying that social networking and the internet have vastly improved our lives, it's worth remembering that we invented it to be our servant, not our master.

MY WEEK OF MINDFULNESS

Writer Christina Quaine learns to live in the now with the help of mindfulness expert Shamash Alidina (learnmindfulness.co.uk)



"The first thing I do when I open my eyes in the morning is check emails/ Twitter/ Facebook

(in that order) on my BlackBerry. I can't remember the last time I went out for a nice dinner without texting a picture of my dessert to my foodie friend.

Mindfulness expert Shamash tells me that in order to live in the present, I should spend five minutes every morning lying in a room (devoid of technological distractions) and concentrate on my breathing. He says my mind will inevitably wander and that when it does, I should yank it back to focus on my breathing.

All I can think about is writing an amusing Facebook update but by the end of the week I actually look forward to my five-minute meditation.

Shamash also asks me to write down five things I'm grateful for every morning – it could be as simple as the ability to walk – and this will enable me to be more reflective. Whenever I get the urge to reach for my laptop I whip out my notebook and look

at my list; reminding myself of what's good in life makes me far happier than idly browsing someone's wedding photos or a friend's holiday pictures on Facebook. I tell Shamash that when I'm bored or stressed with work I invariably turn to cyberspace. Rather than using social networking as a security blanket, he advises making a cup of tea and spending five minutes in my garden just listening to the sounds.

Another exercise is training yourself to tune into your senses – connecting with the smells, sights and sounds around you rather than filling your time with technology. I'm having drinks with my friend Amy and she gets up to go to the loo. Uncomfortable with the idea of sitting alone for two minutes, I'd usually text someone or see what Alan Sugar is up to on Twitter but I've left my phone at home so instead, I enjoy the babble of chatter and admire the photos on the walls.

By the end of the week I'm definitely less technology-dependant. While I don't think I could totally give up my online life, I've learned to appreciate real life a lot more."

