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Unplugging: Escaping the Digital Curse

By Dr. Woody

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In our hyper-connected world, the notion of “unplugging” from our social and professional interfaces seems almost like a fantasy. We live in an age where failing to immediately respond to a text is considered an affront to the sender that could carry dire consequences. Cutting the tethers to our mobile electronic leashes for even just a day would be like a journey into some primitive age. This past May, five neuroscientists decided to take such a journey.

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The week-long trip chronicled in a New York Times article by writer Matt Richtell, focused on the idea of unplugging and the positive effects that downtime can have on the brain. Although not a scientific experiment, the trip, led by University of Utah professor David Strayer, was designed to provide some anecdotal evidence on the impact of unplugging and where to focus future research. The group of researchers spent several days making their way down the San Juan River with no form of digital connectivity. As the trip came to an end, the author noted that even the skeptics among them started to unwind.

Fascinated by the article, I couldn't help but recount my own recent bout with unplugging. On a recent trip to visit my family my sister asked if I wanted to join her, my mother and her newborn baby for trip to the pool at our country club. My immediate response was, “great, I can bring my laptop and get some work done by the pool” to which my mother promptly responded, “laptops are not allowed at the club... it's not an office.” My next thought was, no problem, I'll bring my BlackBerry so I can make some calls and check e-mails. Mom's response to this was: “no cell phones either!” A bit surprised, I thought to myself, how could this be? Doesn't everyone take their laptop to the pool? Needless to say, I didn't go to the pool.

Communication technology has become so intertwined with our work and personal lives that we have become blind to its effects. The very thought of being disconnected is a sign of weakness or lack of dedication. We have become so enthralled with our mobile devices that it feels natural to ignore live people right in front of us in favor of checking e-mail or sending a text. I'll never forget facilitating an executive retreat where I had a room of 10 executives all there for the purpose of getting to know each other and build stronger bonds. Not even 10 minutes into the discussion half of the participants were already thumbing away at their smart phones, barely paying any attention. As soon as I commented on the phenomenon, one of the executives stood up and said: “this is the problem, none of us are ever present.” He went on to describe his frustration with the fact that he couldn't have a face-to-face meeting without competing with someone's BlackBerry.

Unfortunately, his commentary illustrates what has become our standard for professional conduct in this country. If our phone vibrates or chimes, we pick it up without hesitation. Our responses have become so conditioned they are now part of our collective unconscious. Ivan Pavlov would be amused at how the modern American professional has evolved to become so similar to his infamous salivating dog. In my attempts at breaking the spell of this digital curse, here are some tips to consider:

Get Over Yourself

I hate to be the one to break it to you, but you really aren't that important. As a coach and consultant I deal with a lot of egos and without fail, they all suffer from overinflated self-importance. Check yourself, your sense of self-importance is more likely a hindrance than an asset. The world has and will survive without you.

Learn to Manage Expectations

I used to have a friend who would answer his cell phone regardless of time, place, or circumstance. It got to the point where it was almost debilitating. Breaking the habit became very difficult, particularly because of the expectations he set. Be wary of the expectations you set when eagerly responding to the chime of your phone. Once expectations have been set, they are very difficult to change.

Unplug Yourself

Just as Richtell outlined in his article, unplugging is actually a good thing! In American life we are so focused on flying down the highway with our foot to the floor, that we forget where we are going. Sometimes we just need to pull over, step out of the car, and take a few minutes to disconnect from technology, so as to reconnect with ourselves.

All-in-all, be mindful of yourself and your surroundings. Your health and success depend on it.

And if you must know, I checked my blackberry 12 times while writing this article.

Michael "Dr. Woody" Woodward, PhD is an executive coach and author of The YOU Plan: A 5-step Guide to Taking Charge of Your Career in the New Economy. Dr. Woody is president of the consulting firm HCI, sits on the Academic Advisory Board of the Florida International University Center for Leadership, and holds a PhD in organizational psychology.

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