Screen and Us: Managing Screen Time for Better Mental Well-Being

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SUMMARY

In today's digital age, screens play a crucial role in our everyday lives, influencing the way we work, interact and entertain ourselves. "Screen time" refers to the duration spent on devices such as smartphones, tablets, computers, and televisions. While screen usage spans all age groups, excessive exposure has a detrimental effect on mental well-being. Digital overload, resulting from prolonged screen use, impacts cognitive, emotional, and psychological health, contributing to stress, anxiety, depression, and fatigue. This overload has been linked to disruptions in sleep, reduced attention span, social isolation, and even suicidal ideation, especially with constant exposure to negative or distressing content. Guidelines have been already established to limit screen time, particularly for children. Strategies to reduce screen dependency include setting time limits, prioritizing digital detox periods, and promoting offline activities that nurture mental and physical well-being. By adopting mindful screen use and creating healthy boundaries, individuals can minimize the negative impacts of screen time and enhance their overall mental health.

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, screens have become an essential and inseparable part of our daily routines. From smartphones and laptops to televisions and tablets, technology is deeply embedded in how we work, communicate, and entertain ourselves. Word **'Screen time'** refers to the duration a person spends using digital devices that have screens, including smartphones, tablets, computers, and televisions. Screen usage is not limited to a specific age group; individuals of all ages and life stages engage with it. Excess of anything is harmful; likewise, excessive screen time negatively impacts our mental well-being. It is not wrong to say that we cannot live without screens nowadays, but with wise use and mindful restrictions on technology, we can reduce mental overload and improve overall well-being.

Understanding digital overload

Digital overload occurs when we indulge in prolonged screen exposure and it affects our cognitive, emotional, and psychological health. Whether it's constant social media scrolling, binge-watching, or long work hours on a computer, excessive screen time can lead to various mental health challenges, including stress, anxiety, fatigue, distraction and depression. In this context, a recent study reveals that 87% of employees spend an average of 07 hours a day in front of screens, with many experiencing symptoms of depression and fatigue due to digital overload.

Why addressing consequences of excessive screen time is important

Addressing the consequences of excessive screen time is crucial for mental well-being because prolonged screen use can significantly impact our mental health. It negatively impacts an individual's socio-emotional development, hinders emotional expression, reduces face-to-face interactions, and harms interpersonal relationships. Frequent exposure to negative or distressing content on digital platforms can contribute to increased stress and anxiety, feeling of isolation and sometimes suicidal ideation too. The effects can also contribute to depression, sleep disturbances, and a lack of real-world connection, all of which are detrimental to mental well-being. By recognizing and addressing these consequences, individuals can take steps to manage their screen time more effectively, creating healthier boundaries between the digital world and their emotional lives. Prioritizing activities like physical exercise, social interactions, and mindfulness can help restore balance and protect mental well-being.

How excessive screen time affects our mental wellbeing

1. Increased Stress and Anxiety: Constant notifications, social media comparisons, and body image-focused content on platforms like Instagram can escalate stress especially among youth. A connection between screen time

and depression among teenagers was identified in one of the research study, which showed that girls were about 1.5 times more likely than boys to display depressive behaviors for each additional hour of screen time.

2. Disrupted Sleep Patterns: Excessive screen usage, especially before bedtime, disrupts sleep due to blue light emission from digital devices. Blue light suppresses melatonin production (a hormone that regulates sleep), thus making it harder to fall asleep and reducing overall sleep quality, which is essential for mental wellbeing.

3. Decreased Attention Span and Productivity: Prolonged digital engagement, particularly through short-form content like reels, threads and rapid notifications can reduce attention span and cognitive function. Frequent screen distractions may also affect productivity, leading to frustration and mental fatigue.

4. Social Isolation and Emotional Detachment: While we often believe that digital platforms can expand our social networks, it's ironic that excessive screen time actually leading to social isolation. As virtual connections replacing face-to-face interactions, the emotional depth of relationships diminishing and contributing to feeling of loneliness.

5. Suicidal ideation: Excessive 'Doomscrolling' may contribute to the negative thoughts like suicides, self-harm. Constant exposure to distressing or alarming content can overwhelm individuals, heightening feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, and despair. This relentless cycle of negative input can amplify mental health struggles, especially for those already vulnerable, potentially leading to a sense of emotional numbness or even thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

Screen time limits for children:
　　　　Here are the guidelines provided by the Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP) and published by UNICEF to minimize the impact of excessive screen time on children:
1. Children under the age of 2 should not be exposed to screens, except for occasional video calls with relatives.
2. For children aged 1 to 5 years, screen time should be limited to a maximum of 1 hour.
3. For children over 5 years and adolescents, screen time should not exceed 2 hours. Exceptions can be made for online classes, but the less screen time, the better!

Strategies for a Healthy Screen-Mind Balance
1. Set Screen Time Limits: As a parent, you can play a vital role in managing and limiting your children's screen time by raising awareness, establishing clear boundaries, and applying behavioral controls. You should also lead by example by managing own screen time effectively.

2. Prioritize Digital Detox Periods: You can set aside screen-free hours, like during meals or before bedtime, to help reduce screen dependency and promote mental relaxation. Once a week, consider a digital detox by disconnecting from screens and focusing on developing your hobbies.

3. Practice Mindful Screen Usage: Be intentional with your screen time by focusing on specific, meaningful content. Unfollow negative or unproductive material, and engage in positive online interactions. If you're a parent, then it's important to teach your child to use digital platforms primarily for educational purposes.

4. Engage in Offline Activities: Encourage activities that promote mental clarity and emotional well-being, such as engaging in hobbies, physical exercise, reading, and socializing in person. By balancing these activities, you can nurture both your mental and physical health while reducing reliance on digital devices.

CONCLUSION
　　　　In conclusion, while screens are an undeniable part of modern life, excessive screen time can seriously impact mental health, contributing to problems like stress, anxiety, depression, and social isolation. It is crucial to recognize the impact of digital overload on our cognitive and mental well-being and take proactive steps to manage screen time. By implementing strategies such as setting time limits, developing hobbies, prioritizing offline activities, and engaging in digital detoxes, we can create a healthier balance between the digital world and our mental health. Ultimately, adopting mindful screen habits and establishing boundaries will allow individuals to maintain a positive relationship with technology while safeguarding their mental and overall well-being.

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