

Many students complained about Zoom fatigue, some reported that they rely too much on digital devices during the pandemic. Amy Blankson explained how to make good use of the technology and develop a healthy lifestyle with the application of technology.



## ***How Technology Can Be Part of a Happy Life***

*Researchers are exploring what wellness looks like in a digital world.*

*BY AMY BLANKSON | MAY 20, 2021*

Zoom Fatigue. Distraction. Burnout. For many of us, digital overwhelm is all around. The pressures of remote work are all too familiar.

When we think about how to solve these problems, conversations inevitably turn to disengaging from technology: limiting screen time, deleting apps, taking breaks from social media. But what if we approached these issues in a different way, thinking about how to create well-being while using technology?

Over the past two years, the Digital Wellness Institute (which I cofounded) has partnered with a team of international researchers to study digital wellness. Digital wellness reflects the increasing need for more balance in how digital technologies are integrated into every aspect of human life. When you are digitally well, you can:

- Find focus and flow in work
- Live in harmony with both your physical and digital environments
- Connect in meaningful ways with others
- Enjoy strong relationships online and offline
- Build healthy physical and digital practices
- Embrace mindfulness and self-care through intentional technology use
- Understand how to manage your digital data and privacy
- Contribute to a positive digital community in your networks
- When we think about technology this way, we can come up with more creative and realistic ways to pursue happiness in a digital world that go beyond decreasing how much time we spend online.

## Assessing your digital wellness

How do you know if you are digitally flourishing?

Assessing your digital wellness is not just a matter of adding up screen time; rather, it's a holistic assessment that takes into consideration numerous factors. These include feelings of angst around constant connectivity, digital overwhelm, and computer-induced aches and pains, as well as positive emotions and experiences we might have around technology, like savoring pleasant experiences, connecting with others, and a sense of self-efficacy.

Think of digital wellness as a spectrum, ranging from excessive technology use to complete unplugging:



Finding this healthy balance for living with technology involves:

Reflecting upon how, when, where, and how often we use our digital technologies.

Examining what we pay attention to and the quality of that attention when we do.

Aligning how we use our digital technologies with our values and motivations.

Our research at the Digital Wellness Institute has aimed to identify the components of digital wellness and figure out how to measure it. Building on Margaret Swarbrick's research on the eight dimensions of wellness, our team created a picture of what it would look like to flourish in the digital era across dimensions of life, including productivity, the environment, communication, relationships, mental health, physical health, the quantified self, and digital citizenship. We then partnered with 18 leading experts around the globe (including Harvard instructor Heidi Hana, New York Times bestselling author Nir Eyal, and adolescent medicine specialist Doctor Bobo) to survey research and develop actionable recommendations for each domain.



This framework can help you identify potential areas of weakness and pathways to improving your wellness over time. For instance, perhaps you have been working long hours to complete a big project at work. Your productivity might be thriving, but your relationships or mental health might be lagging. By identifying this need, you can recalibrate in real time by leaning into more self-care or social support.

To identify your own target areas for growth, you can take our free Digital Flourishing survey.

### How to boost your digital wellness

Once you have identified areas in which you want to improve, it's time to make some changes to create a more positive digital culture in your life. Here are a few strategies to help you digitally flourish.

**Productivity.** Digital productivity requires us to minimize distractions, enhance our focus, and find work-life balance. If you're working on a task and you stop to look at your phone, for example, it takes just two seconds to read a text message—but it makes you twice as likely to make an error on what you're doing. Worse yet, it takes you an average of 11 minutes to get back into flow with your previous task. Minimize distractions by turning off any notifications on your phone from non-humans (for example, sports, stocks, news alerts, game prompts).

**Environment.** Having organized, comfortable spaces—both physical and digital—is

important to our mental and physical health. Chaos in your home or work environment invites distraction into your life. To proactively set yourself up for success, establish some digital boundaries that work for you and clearly communicate them to family members and work contacts (for example, no work communication after a certain time in the day or week, specific locations where you will not engage in work-related tasks). Consider posting a list of your digital boundaries somewhere visible, both for others and for personal accountability.

**Communication.** Technology multiplies our possibilities for social interaction but also brings with it new challenges. Have you ever been phubbed (phone-snubbed) by someone who interrupted an important conversation with you to check an incoming text? If so, brainstorm a nice way to signal how you feel about being phubbed. Humor is a wonderful way to disarm others but still get your point across. You could casually joke, “Did you just phub me?! You know, phone-snub me?” However, be prepared that, if you are going to hold others accountable, you might be held accountable, too!

**Relationships.** Social media can be the source of much angst and social comparison, particularly when relationships are shallow or flippant. Rather than focusing on the quantity of relationships, hone in on the quality of your connections online. Unfollow unnecessary people or groups who are not adding meaning to your life.

**Mental health.** Whether a certain technology enhances or detracts from our life is often dependent on how we use it. The temptation to endlessly scroll on social media or on news sites can be high, particularly when your brainpower is low (like late at night when you are already tired). Take a few minutes first thing in the morning to write down your intentions for the day. Consider including an intention for how long you want to be online, and use your screen-time settings to hold yourself to your limits.<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>

**Physical health.** Connected device usage has increased 46% since the start of COVID, and, as a result, back aches and neck pain have risen by 50%. Pay attention to your posture when you are sitting at your desk and make sure that your screen is at a height level with your eyes to avoid squinting and hunching.

**Quantified self.** The “quantified self” is a method of seeking to understand yourself through technology, using sensors like wearables (think smart watches) or data trackers (like apps) to optimize health. While this concept sounds new, health providers have been tracking metrics like blood pressure, heart rate, and calories for decades; the quantified self movement simply empowers individuals to track and make sense of their own data. To try out this approach, pick one behaviour to track (like step count) and focus on optimizing that one metric. Set a goal for

yourself and celebrate when you achieve it!

**Digital citizenship.** Having a healthy online civic life means building competency in civil discourse, culturally sensitive communication, online etiquette, and information processing. A person with a high digital citizenship orientation knows about data privacy and its implications for the individual and society, is aware of how their online communication can affect others, has tools at hand to evaluate information obtained from the internet as truthful or biased, and understands how to communicate to different audiences in a way that is sensitive to diversity and inclusion. One of the best ways to gain awareness of your digital footprint in the world is to do a Google “selfie” to see what information about yourself is publicly available. Remove any online information that you no longer wish to share (check [whitepages.com](http://whitepages.com) to see what might be listed publicly).

These suggestions are just a starting place for boosting wellness in the digital era; to learn more strategies, consider enrolling in a program or course online. The ones that I’ve been involved in include the Digital Wellness 101 course co-created by PowerEd and Athabasca University and the Digital Wellness Institute’s 10-week certification program designed for coaches, learning officers, and educators.

While we know that technology will continue to be an integral and ever-present part of our everyday lives, we do have some control over how we use it to digitally flourish, rather than flail in the midst of distraction. By cultivating our own digital wellness, we can leverage technology for its best and highest purposes and begin to shape the future with the choices that we make today.

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