

Digital Detox for Purposeful Technology Use

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ABSTRACT

Digital detox refers to voluntary and time-bound reductions in the use of digital devices or selected digital activities. Complete disconnection, however, is neither practical nor necessary for many users, particularly where smartphones support education, work, public services and agricultural advisory. Evidence from digital-detox interventions remains mixed, although targeted restrictions on selected forms of use may improve attention and well-being under some conditions. The value of digital detox lies less in reducing total screen time than in restoring control over when, why and how digital technologies are used. This article discusses the available evidence, the relevance of digital well-being in India, implications for agricultural extension and a simple seven-day approach for reviewing everyday digital habits.

INTRODUCTION:

At 6:15 in the morning, the phone begins its work before its owner does. It sounds the alarm, displays overnight messages and places a row of headlines beneath the clock. A quick check seems harmless. One notification leads to another, then to a short video or a message that could easily wait. Twenty minutes disappear before the day has properly begun. The smartphone is no longer merely a telephone. It

functions as a bank, classroom, office, camera, map, newspaper and entertainment centre. For farmers and extension personnel, it may also carry weather alerts, market information, pest advisories, photographs and instructional videos. This usefulness makes the familiar advice to simply “switch it off” unrealistic. Essential communication and unnecessary interruption often arrive through the same device. Digital detox is commonly described

as temporary withdrawal from smartphones, social media or other digital services. The idea becomes more useful when it is treated as deliberate regulation rather than complete abstinence. Radtke *et al.* (2022) define digital detox as a voluntary and intentional period of non-use involving either an entire device or selected forms of smartphone use. The practical question is not whether technology is good or bad. It is whether a particular form of use serves a purpose, remains under the user's control and leaves enough space for sleep, work, conversation and other valued activities. Figure 1 places these approaches on a continuum, from a complete temporary break to deliberate everyday use.

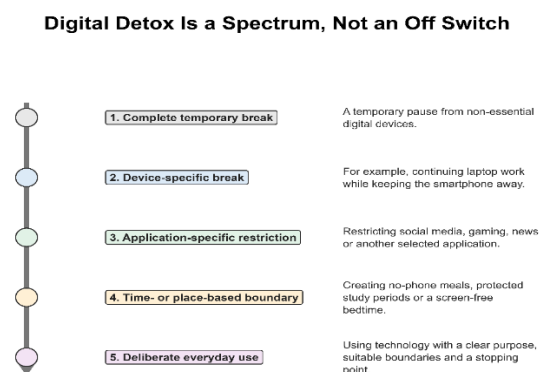


Figure 1. Digital detox as a continuum of temporary and deliberate changes in digital use.

Source: Authors' conceptualization and illustration.

WHY SCREEN TIME ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

Total screen time combines activities that differ greatly in purpose and consequence. Forty minutes spent attending an online class, speaking with family, checking crop prices or seeking a pest advisory is not equivalent to forty minutes of habitual scrolling. Timing and control also matter. The same device may support a necessary task at one moment and interrupt focused work, sleep or conversation at another. Digital well-being is better understood by considering what is being used, when it is used, why it is used and whether the

user can stop when intended. Screen time remains useful as a descriptive measure, but it should not be treated as a complete measure of healthy or problematic digital use.

WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY?

Evidence on digital detox remains mixed. Radtke *et al.* (2022) reviewed 21 intervention studies involving 3,625 participants and found positive, negligible and, in some cases, adverse effects across outcomes related to well-being, social relationships, self-control and performance. The studies differed considerably in what was restricted, how long the restriction lasted and how outcomes were measured. Most participants were drawn from student samples, and the evidence was concentrated largely in Western settings, which limits direct generalisation to populations with different patterns of digital access and use. Castelo *et al.* (2025) tested a more specific restriction in a randomized controlled trial. Mobile internet was blocked on participants' smartphones for two weeks, while calls, text messages and internet access through computers remained available. The intervention improved objectively measured sustained attention, mental health and subjective well-being. Participants also spent more time in face-to-face social interaction, physical activity and outdoor settings. The intervention restricted continuous mobile access rather than requiring complete digital abstinence. These results do not establish that every digital break is beneficial. They support a more specific approach in which the behaviour being restricted, the reason for restricting it and the activity that replaces it are considered together.

DIGITAL WELL-BEING IN AN ALWAYS-CONNECTED INDIA

India's expanding digital connectivity makes complete disconnection impractical for many users. The Comprehensive Modular Survey on

Telecom reported that 96.8 per cent of rural residents aged 15-29 years had used a mobile phone for calls or internet access during the preceding three months, while 92.7 per cent had used the internet (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2025). Digital access now supports education, payments, employment, public services, health information and everyday communication. Access is not uniform, and neither is the freedom to disconnect. A student may depend on a shared household phone. A migrant worker may rely on video calls. A farmer may need weather information or an urgent pest advisory. For such users, keeping the phone switched off for several days is not a realistic measure of digital well-being. The practical goal is greater control over when, why and for how long a device is used. Useful digital communication should remain available without allowing every alert, message or recommendation to demand immediate attention. Digital well-being in India needs to account for both sides of connectivity: the value created by access and the pressure created by continuous availability.

THE AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION PARADOX

Agricultural extension illustrates why digital detox cannot simply mean staying away from the phone. Mobile communication has become an important channel for weather alerts, market information, pest photographs, input information and short instructional videos. For farmers and extension personnel, some of the most useful information on the phone may also be time-sensitive. The difficulty begins when useful communication is mixed with repetitive forwarding, unrelated group messages and the expectation of immediate response. Information received is not the same as information understood or applied. Coggins *et al.* (2025) asked 294 extension workers in Bihar to circulate three wheat agronomy videos and found that WhatsApp accounted for

70 per cent of the surveyed sharing cases. Follow-up interviews identified limitations in social inclusion, two-way discussion, localisation of advice, feedback and relationship-building. The authors viewed chat applications as a useful support to face-to-face extension rather than a substitute for it. Digital communication worked best as support for extension rather than as a replacement for direct interaction. This distinction matters for extension practice. A photograph may help identify a visible crop symptom, while a field visit may reveal problems related to water, soil, input quality or management that are not visible in the image. Digital advisories should be brief, verified, locally relevant and sent through predictable channels. Urgent messages need to be distinguishable from routine material. Farmers should also have a clear way to ask questions and receive follow-up support. The value of digital extension lies in timely and relevant information combined with opportunities for clarification, feedback and local interpretation.

A PRACTICAL SEVEN-DAY DIGITAL RESET

A useful digital reset can focus on one or two habits rather than treating every form of technology use as a problem. The first step is observation: note which applications are opened most often, when unnecessary checking occurs and what usually triggers it. Table 1 presents a simple seven-day self-monitoring framework for observing, modifying and reviewing these habits.

Table 1. A seven-day digital reset for reviewing and adjusting digital-use habits		
Day	Step	Suggested action
Day 1	Measure	Check screen time, frequently used applications and situations that trigger automatic checking.
Day 2	Mute	Disable non-essential notifications and remove unnecessary alerts from the lock screen.
Day 3	Protect sleep	Limit non-essential screen use before bedtime and keep the phone

		away from the bed where practicable.
Day 4	Single-task	Complete two focused work or study periods with the phone out of immediate reach.
Day 5	Replace	Replace one habitual scrolling period with walking, reading, music, exercise or another offline activity.
Day 6	Reconnect	Protect one meal or social interaction from phone interruptions and remain fully engaged.
Day 7	Review	Identify which changes were associated with better concentration, sleep or daily functioning and retain those that were useful.
Source: Authors' conceptualization.		

The reset should not interfere with essential communication. A farmer waiting for a weather warning, a student attending an online class or an employee handling urgent work may need continued access to selected services. At the end of the week, review whether the changes were associated with easier task completion, earlier sleep, fewer interruptions during conversation or missed essential communication. It is also useful to note whether digital use simply shifted to another application or device. Changes that improve daily functioning without disrupting necessary communication can be retained, while those that add inconvenience without benefit can be dropped.

CONCLUSION

Digital detox is more useful when viewed as a way of managing digital habits rather than escaping technology. Total screen time cannot distinguish purposeful use from distraction, and complete disconnection is unrealistic for people who depend on smartphones for work, education, communication or agricultural information. Selective restrictions offer a more practical approach: fewer unnecessary notifications, protected periods for focused work and sleep, and clearer boundaries around

applications that repeatedly capture attention. The same principle applies to agricultural extension, where digital channels can improve the speed and reach of advisory services but should complement, rather than automatically replace, discussion, field observation and local interpretation. Digital well-being does not depend on removing technology from everyday life. It depends on retaining useful access while limiting forms of digital use that repeatedly interfere with sleep, work, social interaction and other valued activities.

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