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Season 3, Episode 7

Connected, Not Consumed: Practical Steps for a Digital Reset

Intro Voiceover: Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health and Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff live their healthiest lives.

Brad Awalt: Welcome to this edition of the Healthier You podcast. My name is Brad Awalt, and I'm the manager of Health Plus. Do you ever feel like your phone is glued to your hand and you scroll and scroll and scroll, but somehow feel more disconnected than ever? If that's the case, you are tuned in to the right podcast. Today, we're going to talk about a digital detox - what it is, why it matters, and how to unplug without completely disconnecting from your life. Joining us today is Dr. J.B. Ward, Assistant Professor of Clinical Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, with the Osher Center for Integrative Health. Dr. Ward helps people find work life balance. Welcome, Dr. Ward.

JB Ward: Thank you. It's great to be here.

BA: So, in simple terms, what is a digital detox? And why does it matter right now?

JBW: The term digital detox is the one most people recognize, although I think the bigger goal is really developing a healthier relationship with technology. At its core, digital detox is simply an intentional change in how we use our devices for a period of time, so that we're using technology more deliberately instead of automatically. Researchers across psychology, communication, and information science have spent the last several years trying to define exactly what it means. But they all come back to the same idea. It's really about being intentional. And this really matters now because technology has become

woven into nearly every part of our lives. We work with it, learn with it, connect with family through it, and even receive healthcare through it. So, the question isn't really whether technology is good or bad. It's how we make sure it's serving us instead of taking over our attention.

BA: I like that definition because I think a lot of times when I hear detox, I think all or nothing. And that's good to hear that it's not just “get rid of your phone,” that there's ways that you can still have it, but, you know, to kind of help with that. So, what does too much screen time actually do to us? Both mentally and physically?

JBW: You know, one of the most interesting things the research has shown recently is that this may not really be a question of screen time anymore. For years, we've talked about how many hours people spend on screens, but increasingly researchers are actually asking how we're using technology. There's even something called the Goldilocks hypothesis, which suggests that the healthiest amount of screen use probably isn't zero. It's sort of somewhere in the middle. Technology can have tremendous benefits. So really the goal is finding that balance where we get those benefits without allowing technology to crowd out the rest of life and become a drain on us. I encourage people to ask themselves a few questions. One, why am I using this right now? Two, how is it affecting my attention or my emotions? And three, what, if anything, is it replacing? That's far more informative than simply counting hours. There's also a framework I really like that describes technology and how it affects us in three different ways. First, it can reallocate our time. So sometimes that can be helpful and enjoyable. It can help with boredom, connect us with loved ones that aren't nearby, and give us an access to a wealth of information that we can use to build or refine skills or stay mentally sharp. But it can also crowd out things like exercise, sleep, time outdoors, or meaningful conversations, which really do help with mental and physical health. Second, it can substitute for real world experiences. Sometimes that is incredibly useful. I wish the DMV had more online services, but other times we lose opportunities for spontaneous interactions. We can even rely so heavily on our devices that researchers have described something called digital amnesia, where we're less likely to remember information because we know our phone is remembering it for us. Maybe even including the events in our lives. Third, technology can interrupt our attention, and therefore our lives. Notifications, texts, Teams messages, emails, alerts - each one of those is asking our brain to switch gears. And while that may feel very small in the moment, over the course of a day, they can really tax our mental resources and leave us mentally fatigued. Healthcare workers know this particularly well because our work days are often filled with many very legitimate interruptions already. And we also know that those interruptions can affect relationships. Researchers even have a term “phubbing,” which combines phone and snubbing, and it describes looking at your phone instead of the person you're with. And it's

associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Most of us have experienced both sides of that. So, the goal with this area isn't eliminating technology. It's creating moments where our attention can fully belong to one task, one conversation.

BA: Great. So, what are some red flags that might be signs of maybe doing some form of digital detox?

JBW: Yeah, most of the time, we already have a sense that we are needing something like this. So maybe you noticed that you're reaching for your phone automatically without really planning to, or maybe your partner or kids have actually said something to you about it; or you're finding it hard to focus on other things; or maybe just being simply curious about whether changing a few habits might make you feel better mentally and physically. Also, maybe feeling mentally overloaded, easily distracted, or noticing that you want to cut back, but are having trouble doing it. And if the last one's true for you, it doesn't necessarily signal an addiction, although that is a very real thing. But many apps are intentionally designed to capture and keep our attention, and they use what we know about the brain and how it works to do so very powerfully. So, another thing that it is useful to ask yourself is what role is this serving for me? The phone sometimes isn't the problem. Sometimes we're tired. Sometimes we're anxious. Sometimes we're avoiding something difficult. Sometimes we're simply looking for connection. So, understanding why we pick up the phone is often more powerful than counting how many minutes we spend on it. People who intentionally change their habits in these ways often report feeling less overstimulated, less compelled to constantly check their devices, and more emotionally balanced. And some studies have also shown, over time, reductions in stress and anxiety.

BA: That's great. So, for someone who is really busy and can't just completely disconnect, what are two to three realistic ways to maybe take a break from being connected all the time?

JBW: Yeah, the good news is that most of these successful digital detoxes don't actually involve complete removal of technology altogether. In fact, smaller strategic changes often work just as well, and perhaps even better because they're easier to sustain. I encourage people to think of it as an experiment rather than a rule. Perhaps try one hour each day without your phone, or maybe turn off notifications for every app except the ones that really matter, or choose a place like the dinner table or the bedroom or walking in nature, where your phone simply doesn't go. If someone wants a little more structure, I suggest asking these five questions that actually researchers ask when they're looking at an intervention; when they're developing something for helping others. And that is, what am I changing? So which device, what part of technology? Why am I changing it? How much am I changing? So being pretty clear on whatever those guardrails are, the time limit that you might want.

When will I do it? There's some evidence that time of day might really matter, particularly if it's right before bed or in the morning. It helps us wind down or wake up to have other activities to be doing. And I think most importantly is what do I hope this creates more room for? Because the goal isn't simply less screen time. It's having more time for what matters.

BA: So, being at a workplace, many of us are very busy, and we need our devices to be able to function and do our job. So how do we find a healthy balance instead of going with the extreme of just getting rid of your phone?

JBW: I think that it's important to ask key questions for yourself about what's really getting in the way of anything. What it looks like for one person may be very different than what it looks like for someone else. And we need our devices often to do our jobs and to help other people and to stay connected. Really it's those key things that are getting in the way for you that are going to bring you the most benefit if you can make some healthy adjustments around that and cut back.

BA: Right. Have you personally tried a digital detox? And if so, what changed for you or for your clients that you meet with?

JBW: Yes, I have. Over time, I found a few habits that work really well for me. I turned off almost all notifications on my phone because I realized I was very drawn in by them and sometimes they were interrupting me. Sometimes several times an hour. And most phones have a really great way to turn off those notifications. If you play around with that, you can often find ways that work best for you. I also put a time limit on Facebook in particular for myself because I noticed that I could really easily lose track of time in Facebook more than others. So there's a little pop-up that comes up after 15 minutes when I'm using Facebook and often it really helps me kind of refocus to why I even opened the app in the first place. And finally, I do not use my phone during the first hour of my morning. rather than just setting that limitation, I created a morning ritual that helps me greet the day, both mentally and physically. So none of these came from some rule book. They really came from paying attention to how technology was affecting me. And I do expect those will continue to adapt as technology continues to change in my life.

BA: That's great. So as we wrap up this edition of the Healthier You podcast, what are your top three quick tips for somebody who wants to get started today?

JBW: First, I would get curious before you make any big changes. So really just asking yourself, what role is this technology playing in my life and is it getting in the way? Second, let go of guilt. This isn't about being a good or bad digital user. It's really about learning what helps you thrive. And third, remember that technology itself isn't an enemy. It's really more

about balance. In fact, many phones already include tools like focus mode, sleep mode, app timers, and notification controls that can support healthier habits. And if it's okay, I'd like to leave listeners with this sentiment. A digital detox can be a wonderful place to begin. But I think the real goal really is building a healthy relationship with technology over a lifetime. Technology's becoming more deeply integrated into our lives every year. The question isn't whether or not we will use it. The question is whether we'll use it intentionally. If your technology is consistently helping you spend your attention on what matters most to you, rather than a drain, it's probably serving you well. And I think that's a much healthier goal than simply trying to spend as little time on our phones as possible.

BA: Well, that's great. So small changes can make a big difference. Scroll a little less, live a little more. Thank you for listening and thank you for sharing this information with us.

Voiceover: Thanks for tuning in to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health and Wellness. If you are a Vanderbilt University Medical Center faculty or staff member, you can earn credit on your go for the Gold Wellness Actions log by listening to two podcasts. Simply click the go for the gold link in the show notes below to record your participation, and stay tuned for future episodes.