

FEAR OF A DISCONNECTED LIFE

I hate how much I rely on the Internet and my smartphone. So why is it so hard to unplug?

By Elizabeth Kelsey

I fight the impulse to check e-mail on my iPhone before I can even read through one *New Yorker* article. I can't watch an episode of *Arrested Development* without Googling Jason Bateman's age (he just turned 45, in case you were curious). Forget about escaping to a lunch out with a friend—she whips her iPhone out of her purse, like a gun from a holster, as soon as we sit down.

I have begun to feel as if technology is controlling everyone around me, myself included. I wonder how I'd fare if I disconnected from it one day each week, and so I vow to make my Sundays cyber-free. It turns out people have already been purposefully disconnecting, like those of the Sabbath Manifesto project who, harking back to the idea of the Sabbath as a time of rest and reflection, promote an annual National Day of Unplugging (this year's starts at sunset on March 7). I keep my ground rules simple: no Internet, no Googling, no e-mail.

My first attempt begins badly, even though I thought I was prepared. I had printed Sunday dinner's recipe from Epicurious.com the day before, so

there was no need for me to go online. But that Sunday afternoon, I realize I haven't sealed a rendezvous with a friend whose e-mail address is my only form of contact. I cheat—logging into Gmail to confirm our meeting time.

Things don't improve the next week when out-of-state guests arrive and want to tour the area. I no longer keep a physical map handy, and when Sunday rolls around, I check the Internet for directions, cheating once again. And I figure that since I'm on the Internet for directions, I might as well check my e-mail, too. Several times. I also check Facebook, scan a newspaper's digital edition, and stream an episode of *Breaking Bad* on Netflix.

I am like the dieter who

sneaks one brownie, then eats the entire pan.

Or an addict. According to Dr. Ben Nordstrom, a psychiatry professor and director of addiction services at Dartmouth (the college where I work), "There are neuroimaging data that the experience of 'craving' the use of technology activates the same brain areas activated in the craving of drugs." But Nordstrom points out that this could be different from wanting to "check" Facebook or Twitter accounts, where the behavior is used to reduce anxiety. So we check e-mail or Facebook to make sure

we're not missing anything. Yes, I can relate to that.

Like many, I suffer from FOMO: fear of missing out—on what, though, I am not sure. I do not miss going on a 300-mile bike ride with a friend or visiting Disney World with my sister and her adolescent sons on a holiday weekend, but I do feel relieved when I log into Facebook, read about these activities, and note that everything is generally OK among the people I care about. Raised to be polite above all things, I'm glad when I can answer e-mails as speedily as possible. And as for factoids such as Jason

Bateman's age? I have a mind curious for trivia that has become all too accustomed to quick fixes.

I'm not as bad off as some who trade the real world for the virtual one. "Problems arise when people engage in a behavior to the point that it prevents them from meeting social, occupational, or family obligations," says Nordstrom, "or when it causes them to forgo other activities in their lives."

But I can see that even my moderate reliance on technology affects my happiness. The self-soothing practice of checking for

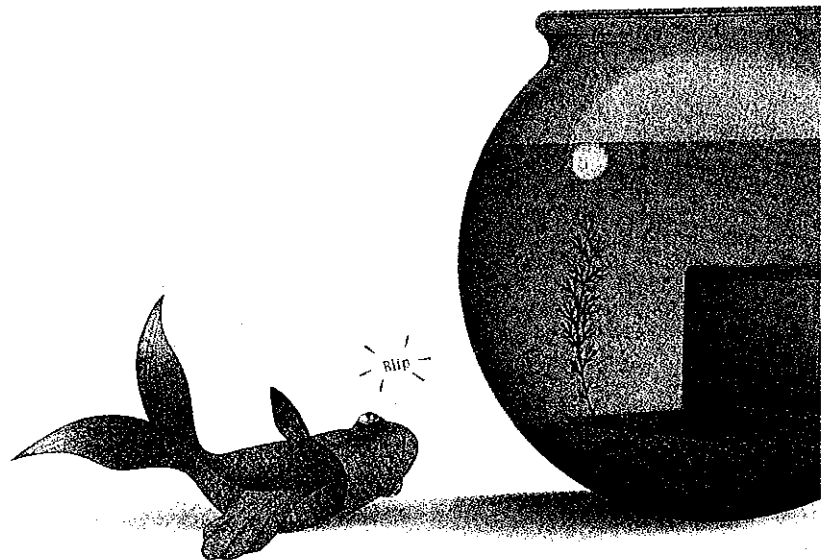


Illustration by BRETT RYDER

29%

of cellphone owners describe their device as **"something they can't imagine living without,"** according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project

brunch, cook dinner. And yet I also marvel at how much time I seem to have to do those things. For the first time since I can remember — middle school, maybe? — I experience a long, lazy Sunday. But I wonder who has messaged me. In the middle of reading the paper on the couch, I start to get up, then realize I've stood only to go check my e-mail, and sit back down.

When I awake Monday morning I feel a combination of dread and eagerness as I reach for my iPhone to check the e-mails that had arrived since Saturday night, to see all that I have missed. What have I missed?

Multiple ads from sportswear companies.

An invitation to connect with an acquaintance on LinkedIn.

An e-mail from a friend whose response could wait. I have missed nothing.

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messages or information online, which had begun as a way to reduce anxiety, actually has the opposite effect as I feel the need to check more and more.

By midwinter I resolve to finally pass a Sunday without the Internet. As I dress for my long training run that chilly morning, instead of checking the temperature on my iPhone, as usual, I step out on the porch in my pajamas. As human beings have done for ages, I assess the temperature by experiencing it.

I have an uneasy feeling the entire day as I read the paper, go out to



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