

Embracing digital minimalism

Reduce technology use to reduce anxiety and increase productivity.

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN, and Tanya M. Cohn, PhD, MEd, RN

KATIE* is a new manager. She loves her leadership role, but she also feels anxious and stressed most of the time. Katie shared these feelings with her mentor, who recommended that she track how she spends her time both at work and at home. Katie was surprised to discover how much time she spends on her cellphone, answering staff texts, and looking at Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Katie's mentor suggests that she place boundaries around her screen time. If Katie embraces digital minimalism, she may feel less anxious and stressed. Although Katie is somewhat skeptical, she agrees to develop a plan for a digital detox.

Katie isn't alone in her challenge to decrease screen time. We know that technology can make us more productive, but it also can be distracting, causing us additional stress and anxiety.

The key is to learn to use technology to support your work and goals rather than let it take over your time and mental energy. Learning to quiet your mind in a world now driven by technology can be complicated.

Cal Newport, PhD, a national expert and researcher on how technology impacts our lives, has found that

technology overuse leads to a loss of personal autonomy, increased stress, and burnout. Social media apps, although designed to promote

connection, frequently lead us to feel more disconnected and dissatisfied with our lives.

Changing how you use a smartphone or other devices can be difficult because, in many ways, they're addictive. To be successful, Katie must understand how her screen time is affecting her emotions. She'll then need to change her current mindset to embrace digital minimalism and do a digital decluttering. None of this will be easy.

Screen time's impact on emotions

The Center for the Digital Future at USC Annenberg reports that, on average, Americans spend 23.6 hours online per week, of which 14.3 hours are during work. Spending such a significant amount of time online each week, nearly an entire day, has the potential to impact an individual's psychosocial well-being. So, it's not surprising that Reed's research illustrated that higher amounts of screen time are associated with greater feelings of anxiety and depression. This relationship between significant digital use, anxiety, and depression may be what Katie is experiencing. Interestingly, had Katie not reached out to her mentor and gone through the process of logging how she spends her time, she might not have connected the dots herself. The widespread social acceptance of our technology-driven world means few of us question our personal technology use.

The Center for the Digital Future research indicates that 73% of people between ages 18 and 34 and 64% of those ages 34 to 54 consider the internet to be either important or very important for social relationships. This high level of acceptance of the internet's importance in maintaining social relationships makes disconnecting even more challenging. Failing to engage the way others do can lead



to a fear of missing out (FOMO), an overwhelming desire to stay connected and involved in all situations. (To learn more about FOMO, visit myamericannurse.com/confronting-the-fear-of-missing-out.)

For Katie, her status as a new nurse manager can lead to feelings of work FOMO, causing her to increase her cellphone and staff text use. She may feel that overextending herself without digital boundaries increases her staff's perceptions of support and keeps her fully engaged in every day-to-day activity on the unit. However, her work FOMO is contributing to her increasing feelings of anxiety and stress, which will result in leadership burnout that may cascade into an inability to connect in person with her staff. Katie's decision to perform a self-assessment and digital detox will help get her back to a healthy psychosocial mindset.

A digital minimalism mindset

Changing your relationship with digital devices requires a mindset change. Your mindset includes the thoughts and beliefs that ultimately shape your habits and drive your behaviors. Katie's current mindset is that she needs to stay continually connected with others via texts, email, and social media. People with a digital minimalism mindset view technology differently. Newport describes it as focusing online time to a few carefully selected activities that support what you value and choosing to miss out on everything else. Your technology tools move from being a source of distraction to devices that support your work and life. You're not discarding technology; you're reclaiming control over your screen time and what you choose to let into your life. (See *3 core principles of digital minimalism*.)

Katie probably knows people in her life who are digital minimalists. They're generally calm, happy people who can hold a conversation without peeking at their phones, and they can socialize with friends and family without an obsessive need to document every experience. They may be nurse leaders who leave units on Friday and don't get texts from staff over the weekend because they've empowered their charge nurses to make decisions, and they don't have FOMO because they know what brings them meaning and satisfaction. These digital minimalists can serve

3 core principles of digital minimalism

Cal Newport, PhD, provost's distinguished associate professor in the department of computer science at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, has identified these three core principles of digital minimalism:

- 1. Clutter is costly.** As we move through life, we collect digital baggage—such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—that can become distracting. The overall negative costs can begin to outweigh the small benefits that each item provides.
- 2. Optimization is essential.** Digital decluttering means retaining only the technology you want and is congruent with your values.
- 3. Intentionality is satisfying.** The act of taking control over your digital life is empowering. Making intentional decisions about how to use your time is vital, as is accepting that less can be more.

as powerful role models and guides on Katie's journey.

Digital decluttering

Digital decluttering starts with thinking about your relationship with technology. Katie began this process by tracking how she spends her time and deciding to do a digital decluttering. Decluttering isn't a cold turkey approach, although some do find that a digital sabbatical can be liberating. Digital decluttering means that, after tracking the time you spend with technology, you determine essential versus nonessential technology. You can then replace time spent on nonessential apps and devices with live social time. A significant difference between users and nonusers of technology is that those who overengage in technology spend, on average, 3 hours less socializing face to face compared to those who limit their technology use.

Many professionals, especially those like Katie in leadership roles, might initially feel that all digital use for work is productive and essential. Although this could be true, a digital decluttering isn't just about reducing the types of technology but also using necessary technology meaningfully. Instead of constant phone checks and quick text responses to show her leadership engagement, Katie could spend more time cultivating team accountability and collaboration. If she did this, the team might have the confidence to work out smaller issues and communicate with Kate about more essential items that require her input.

Digital decluttering also requires the discipline to take technology breaks. This might

include taking daily morning or lunch breaks from technology. Katie would need to communicate these boundaries to her staff, letting them know that she won't be available during those times and then sticking to that plan. These boundaries also extend to any weekends off and vacation time. If Katie digitally declutters, she'll be able to reduce her stress and anxiety and feel refreshed when she restarts work. In addition, she'll reclaim her leisure time and live life with more intention.

Less stress, more productivity

The path to digital minimalism is not a one-and-done event. Technology will continue to change society in both good and bad ways. Katie will need to keep pace with technology and social media apps to stay relevant in her work, but if she adopts a digital minimalism mindset she'll be able to focus on what technology to keep and what to let go. She'll be forced to consider what brings peace and value to her life and what doesn't. These decisions aren't easy but they're liberating and lead to a less stressful and more productive life. **AN**

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*Name is fictitious.

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