

Digital detoxification: An urgent need for teen well-being

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Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are increasingly embedded in society, and adolescents spend more time connected to digital devices.

Social networks have transformed the way we relate to each other, but this sometimes out-of-control use is not without risk. While some highlight the purported benefits of these platforms, such as the ability to keep in touch with friends or access information, more and more voices are warning about the negative consequences of prolonged exposure to these digital environments, mainly linked to loss of in-person social interaction, less physical activity and less time and quality of sleep.^{1,2} Digital wellness involves the healthy use of technology, privacy protection and online safety.³

Digital detoxification, understood as the intentional reduction or temporary abstinence from the use of digital media, particularly the use of smartphones and presence in social networks, has emerged as a possible solution to mitigate the negative impacts of technology abuse on the well-being of adolescents.^{1,4}

They are highly vulnerable to the risks of social comparison, cyberbullying, and anxiety generated by the fear of missing out (FOMO).

Excessive use of these platforms has been

linked to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. The most effective way to generate this digital detoxification is currently being discussed, considering the ultimate impact on the well-being of the adolescent's overall health.⁴

A recent analysis by Marciano et al. (2024) showed that there is no consensus on what digital detoxification means, nor on how to measure its effects. Even in cases where improvements in well-being were reported, such as a slight reduction in anxiety, these improvements are often temporary and disappear as soon as adolescents resume using the networks.³ This suggests that digital detoxification, far from being a definitive solution, is merely a patch that does not address the underlying problems.³

In addition, many teens who participate in these programs report feeling increased stress when they go offline, as they feel excluded from online social interactions. The fear of being left out of the group, the pressure to remain updated on what is happening in their network of contacts, and the omnipresence of social networks makes it more difficult than it seems to disconnect again.

In Latin America, where the gap between those who promote responsible use of technology and those who see it as an indispensable tool for daily life is vast, digital detoxification interventions

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should be approached cautiously. Promoting a moderate reduction in network use rather than total abstinence would offer more significant benefits in overall well-being.

Some recommendations include:

Gradual reduction of screen time: While it has been shown that a drastic reduction may generate more anxiety, a progressive decrease may offer a small temporary relief. However, this strategy should be accompanied by close monitoring, since adolescents tend to return quickly to their previous habits. The Sociedad Argentina de Pediatría recommends limiting screen time to educational, recreational, and quality entertainment activities supervised by adults. It is crucial that adolescents receive guidance on the responsible use of social networks, privacy, personal data management, and risks such as cyberbullying and exposure to inappropriate content. The approach should be educational, promoting healthy habits and a balanced relationship with technology.⁵

Education about network risks: It is imperative that teenagers understand that the benefits they believe they are getting from social networks are, in many cases, illusory or ephemeral. Awareness campaigns should focus more on the dangers than on the potential benefits of moderate use.

Psychological support programs: For those adolescents who demonstrate significant dependence on networks, digital detoxification programs should include psychological support to help them deal with the anxiety generated by withdrawal from these environments.

Digital detoxification has been presented as a possible solution to the growing problem of excessive smartphone and social network use among adolescents, but the results are still constantly evaluated, always considering the individuals' age and sex and the social environment in which they are immersed.

Future evaluations will determine the long-term utility and effectiveness of these interventions. ■

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