

e-talk

balance in a wireless world
by karen richardson

Are you a crackberry?

The term, coined by work-life balance expert Linda Duxbury of Carleton University's Sprott School of Business, is used to describe those among us who are addicted to our wireless e-mail devices, cell phones and other technologies that allow us to work anywhere, anytime. As an example of just how reliant we have become on our gadgets, a recent three-hour power outage, which affected about 12 million people across North America, caused an angry backlash among those who depend on these devices. Employees of Citizenship and Immigration Canada were also recently banned from using their personal digital assistants between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m. in an effort to reduce work stress — a decision that was hailed by some, but not all.

Do wireless devices increase our stress level or help alleviate it? Either way, many people can't imagine how stressful their lives would be without them. "If you're travelling on a train, for instance, you can deal with these questions in real time and solve all queries as they come up, rather than worry about them," says John Pliniussen, associate professor of innovation, sales and eMarketing at Queen's School of Business. For some, this might mean being able to work when it is convenient, and balancing it with the rest of their lives.

"Unfortunately, the days of nine to five are gone, but this is not necessarily a bad thing," says Pliniussen. This might mean being able to take time away from the office to

care for an aging or sick family member, but still taking care of business, or taking an extra week for a family vacation with the use of a wireless device. "Checking e-mail for 20 minutes at the beginning of the day can give you the peace of mind to be able to relax after that," he says.

Workers in some sectors may find wireless technology improves their work life, says Bob Cavanaugh, director of technology for the Queen's School of Business. Information technology workers who use wireless devices, for instance, can "resolve most issues in only a couple of minutes of interruption. "We find there is much less stress on them, it is more convenient and things get responded to faster. E-mail is becoming the lifeblood of businesses, but it sure beats voice mail, which is a real time-waster."

Some argue that wireless devices increase workload dramatically because they allow us to work anytime, anywhere. While some may argue they create a false sense of urgency, a need to respond to a message right away, Pliniussen claims there is usually etiquette in regards to response times. "In the BlackBerry world, people know you may not answer instantly, but unless it is urgent, there is a 24-hour turn-around time," he says. Ultimately, it's the job, the project, or how the jobs are managed that might be the problem — not the technology, he says, adding that the BlackBerry is "becoming what the calculator was to the world of business."

But a recent study of more than 3,000 Canadians from the Toronto-based Solutions Research Group reports that Canadians are so addicted to wireless devices that they actually feel anxiety and stress when disconnected from them. The report, released this year, called *Disconnect Anxiety: And Four Reasons Why It's So Difficult to Stay Off the Grid*, found that 88 per cent of Canadians took their cell phone with them on vacation last year, and nearly half agreed that devices such as BlackBerries "chain you more to work than free you." The study uses the term "disconnect anxiety," a phenomenon described as "various feelings of disorientation and nervousness experienced when a person is deprived of Internet or wireless access for a period of time."

Results from the study also showed that in 1998, only 34 per cent of Canadians were Internet users, and only 10 per cent of those had high-speed Internet at home. A decade later, that number has more than doubled, with 75 per cent of Canadians now having Internet access at home, which amounts to 23 million Canadians.

As technology evolves, the need to be available and constantly in touch with colleagues is becoming a real issue and is causing health problems, says Dr. Ruzica

Jokic, assistant professor of psychiatry at Queen's University and a consultant at the Providence Care Mood Disorders Research and Treatment Service. "The dangers of not 'turning off' can have a profound impact on general health and can lead to sleep problems and the inability to relax," says Jokic, who sees people with anxiety and treatment-resistant mood disorders at Providence Care. While some people are able to switch on and off and manage this work-life balance, those who are, by nature, workaholics or perfectionists or those with anxious personalities are the most at risk for developing addictive problems. "These people cannot let go," says Jokic. "They are not able to prioritize — they feel the urge to perform tasks right away and to be in control all the time."

To those who check their e-mail or use wireless gadgets in the evening and before bed, she cautions, "This leads to increased thinking about work-related problems. The mind cannot stop working, and the person cannot go to sleep. This is a time when you should normally be doing other things." A bright, flickering screen also acts as a stimulus that disrupts normal sleep. In patients who suffer from anxiety disorders and headaches, it can provoke migraines, she says.

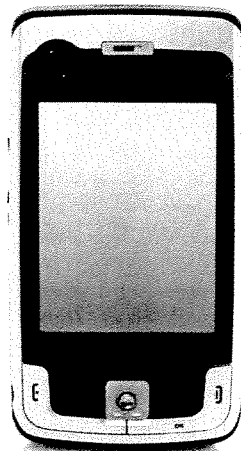
Part of the problem with people who check their e-mail at night is that very often they will continue to do so right up until they go to bed. "I have patients who sleep with their BlackBerries, since they feel that they must constantly remain in touch."

Problems with sleep, particularly if they persist for months and years, put people at risk for developing depression and anxiety disorders. "If you place people like this in a situation where they are constantly accessing a gadget, there is a high possibility their anxiety level is going to increase. The more they worry, the more they check their e-mail, thereby creating a vicious circle."

At what point does it start to become a problem, and when are people said to have an e-mail or Internet addiction? According to Jokic, it is when people start neglecting their family and social life and are thinking only about checking their e-mail as soon as possible. "They have a gadget which is constantly beeping and they are text messaging all the time. Addicts are not able to separate what needs to be done immediately from that which can wait."

One study of more than 400 U.S. students, published in the *Journal of American College Health* in 2007, showed that 90 per cent used the Internet daily, 50 per cent of those were abusing it, and 25 per cent had an addictive Internet dependency. Those who had an Internet addiction also had a greater incidence of depression and despair.

"In medical terms, if you compare (Internet or e-mail) addiction to drugs or alcohol, what occurs is that a person develops a certain degree of tolerance," says Jokic. "This means that once they start using a gadget, they feel the need to use it more and more frequently and for ever-increasing periods of time." Addicted persons may also exhibit symptoms of withdrawal. For example, they may feel anxious and uneasy if they do not access their wireless device, indicating a certain degree of psychological dependence. "If someone is on vacation and is constantly worried about not immediately checking e-mail, then it is a problem."



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Those with an Internet addiction usually have a void they are trying to fill, says Jokic. "Addiction to technological gadgets can lead to social isolation — including neglect of family life and not seeking relationships because of the false belief that everything they need can be obtained on the Internet. This is all at the expense of true fulfillment and personal relationships."

Do you control your wireless gadget or does it control you?

"One of the worries about the new technologies is that we haven't developed a balanced approach to dealing with them or disciplines around them," says Dr. John

Smythe, a pediatric cardiologist at Kingston General Hospital. Smythe has studied meditation and mindfulness techniques for more than 15 years and is trained in a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program that has been taught at many U.S. and Canadian medical centres. "When adding a new technology such as a BlackBerry, you need to ask yourself, 'Does it improve my life and can I control it?' Technology has the ability to impose itself into all aspects of our lives, and the time pressure created by new technologies can easily create more stress in our lives. We have to be able to set limits, to say 'no.'"

While Smythe says that some stress is good, it is important to "de-stress," to return to a settled, baseline rhythm after a stress response or reaction. "Because things in our society are happening so rapidly, we may never get back to baseline, so stress becomes chronic and unresolved. Unresolved stress is associated with many physical and psychological illnesses, from hypertension to burnout. So we have to create downtime. How we work with our mind affects the health of our bodies, and vice versa, because they are inseparable."

One way to create downtime and to relax is through mindfulness-based techniques meditation. "We have the capacity within our mind to relax ourselves consciously, to de-stress," says Smythe. "The degree of relaxation that happens when we meditate is much deeper than the relaxation we have when we sleep. And it can have important health benefits."

Rather than "zoning out" by watching TV or surfing the Internet, he recommends people spend a few minutes simply reconnecting with their body, with a "sense" of being present. "When we develop our capacity to attend to ourselves in this way, we also become more able to attend to others. This is important for many reasons, not the least of which are the benefits of open, supportive relationships to our health and well-being."

TIPS

- Stay away from e-mail at least a few hours before bedtime, similar to avoiding other heavy stimulus late at night such as heavy exercise or coffee.
- Be aware of the warning signs of Internet addiction: neglecting family life and thinking about work all the time. Be mindful of the importance of relationships for stress reduction.
- Take a five- or 10-minute break during the day to recharge and to re-exert a sense of control, an important factor in stress resilience.
- Develop strategies for "shutting off" through meditation, yoga or exercise. |k|