

Digital Detoxing: A Lawyer's Best Friend

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The Authors Are Detox Veterans

While that heading might seem a little silly, it is absolutely true that fighting digital addiction is a true battle. It took us a long time to realize how deep our addiction was – and winning our battle against the “drug-like” compulsion to be online was not an easy victory.

So . . . if you know you need a digital detox, we hope that what follows will be useful to you. And take heart, there are many of us who have now graduated from addiction to a MUCH healthier way of living!

The History of the Legal Profession's Focus on Lawyer Well-Being

A brief history is useful on this topic. We've talked about lawyer wellness for a very long time, but the first giant wave that got dead serious about lawyer well-being was the ABA's 2017 report "[The Path to Lawyer Well-Being](#)." After all this time, it's still a good read – and of course lawyer well-being encompasses far more than digital detoxing.

In our own state of Virginia, we added “Comment 7” to our version of ethical rule 1.1 (Competence). The comment states: “A lawyer's mental, emotional, and physical well-being impacts the lawyer's ability to represent clients and to make responsible choices in the practice of law. Maintaining the mental, emotional, and physical ability necessary for the representation of a client is an important aspect of maintaining competence to practice law.”

Amen. The Virginia State Bar also issued a report in May of 2019 entitled: "[Proactive Wellness: How to Identify, Understand, and Mitigate Lawyers' Occupational Risks](#)." Author Nelson had the privilege of serving on the Virginia State Bar Special Committee on Lawyer Well-Being which authored the report. Her particular emphasis was on – you guessed it – digital addiction and digital detoxing. That report (and many like it across the country) are well worth reading.

Virginia issued an updated report in June 2022 entitled "[The Occupational Risks of the Practice of Law](#)." Since we all solve problems by learning about the genesis of the problems and proven techniques for conquering the problems, the three resources above are a good place to start. Undoubtedly, your own state bar has many resources of its own.

The Smartphone: A Ball and Chain

Increasingly, we are tied to our smartphones. You have only to drive to work to see a scary number of people, lawyers included, driving while texting. We live in a world where research shows that one-third of us are trying (not very successfully) to cut back on screen time. Our self-assessment tends to be that we are “burned out.”

Do you remember the terms “digital immigrants” – those who had no computers/smartphones in their youth and “digital natives” – those who can’t remember a day without them? Statistics show that the “digital natives” have a rougher time detoxing. The statistics indicate that 47% of lawyers detox “sometimes.” But lawyers under the age of 40 are much less likely to detox. In fact, 76% never or seldom detox. So . . . the younger you are, the greater your addiction to smartphones (which may extend of course to laptops/computers).

Overall, depending on the study you read, 20-40% of lawyers have a digital addiction problem. Our own experience with our lawyer friends suggests that the percentage may be closer to 40%.

Do We Need to Distance Ourselves from Our Smartphones?

We think the answer is a resounding yes! Studies have shown that we check our phones an astonishing 47 times a day. And 2/3 of us check our phones within 15 minutes of getting up. Half of lawyers sleep with their phone on their nightstand – or even in their beds!

Overall, more than half of our waking hours is spent staring at some sort of screen.

That brings us to the “3 Cs” Defining Addiction.

- Control – we cannot control our use of our computers or phones
- Compulsion - we are preoccupied with technology to the exclusion of many other parts of life
- Consequences – we continue our fervent use of technology in spite of negative social, physical and mental consequences

If the “3 Cs” are reflective of your life, perhaps it’s time for a change.

Symptoms of Digital Addiction (Many are Similar to Symptoms of Alcohol/Drug Addiction)

Let’s just make a list – no one will fit all, but if you see yourself in some, it should hit home.

- Loneliness or isolation
- Sleep disruption
- Inability to concentrate
- Headaches
- Feelings of being overwhelmed
- Anxiety, sometimes panic
- Stress
- Depression
- Burning eyes
- Exhaustion
- Inferior legal work product
- Poor time management

- Sore neck, back pain, etc.

How Do You Find Help?

Virtually every state has the equivalent of the Virginia Judges & Lawyers Assistance Program. These programs are wonderful resources, particularly if your addiction has become so serious that your health and/or your work are badly impacted.

The wonderful part of such programs is that they are confidential. These assistance programs don't share information with the disciplinary folks so you can be candid about what's wrong without being apprehensive about being disciplined by the bar.

The folks who staff the programs are familiar with the issues you are facing and have concrete suggestions for helping you unchain yourself from your addiction.

If you simply search online for "Digital Detox Retreats", you'll be overwhelmed. These retreats are now global! "Disconnect to reconnect" is an often used phrase – and it's apt – we do indeed need to disconnect to reconnect - with family, friends, nature, and so much more.

Even your phone can be your friend. Two of the best things you can do to disconnect is use the software already on your phone to manage screen time. If you have an Android phone, go to "Settings . . . Digital Wellbeing" and set your time for work time or "me time." If you have an iPhone, Go to "Settings . . . Screen Time" and set time limits for all your apps – while you are there, schedule downtime!

Tips for Digital Detoxing Success!

Make a plan and stick to it. Rome was not built in a day and you won't detox in a day. Wean yourself off the phone gradually. Give clients notice – an "away message" is a great help for emails, so (for instance), a client who sends an email after hours on Friday may receive a reply that you will respond to emails on a Monday. Most of us already use "away messages" when we go out of town, but why not use them simply to let clients know when they will hear back? Colleagues will receive the same message – you may want (or need) to have a method for them to contact you in an emergency (e.g., via text).

Delete time-sucking apps – you know which ones suck all your time!!! At one presentation we gave, a judge stopped listening to us once he heard this tip and he deleted 84 apps from his phone on the spot. We got a wonderful note later from the judge telling us what a difference those deletions had made in his life. The "cure" can be different for different people, that's for sure!

In a world where we get an average of 60-80 notifications per day, get rid of push notifications (anything you can see, hear or feel) so your train of thought is not continuously interrupted. For Androids and iPhones, just go to "Settings/Notifications" to make this happen.

Law Firms Have an Obligation to Help Lawyers Succeed in Digital Detoxing

Increasingly, law firms are noting that digital addictions is a problem for their lawyers – especially where the law firms themselves mandate employee online access. We are beginning to see law firms have guidelines for availability at night or during weekends – tiny steps today, but we hope they will grow as law firms appreciate the role they can play in nurturing lawyer wellness.

Final Words of Encouragement

Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu said long ago, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Take that single step today and then keep on taking your journey away from digital addiction step by step.

We did exactly that – and it made all the difference in the world.

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