

WHAT CAN WE
DO ABOUT IT?



14. Helping Adolescents Change Digital Media Use

Perhaps your teenager's use of digital media is already problematic. Parents/caregivers may think, "It's too late. I wish I had done things differently years ago." The good news is, you always have the option to make changes. Behaviors and expectations can always be adjusted, especially with new information. It is never too late! Below are some strategies you can use to help your adolescent change their relationship with digital media.

Introduction of Healthy Alternative Activities

In addictions treatment, we tell clients, "If you want to successfully remove the addictive substance or behavior from your life, you must replace it with something else." For some people, that "something else" is a 12-step program like Alcoholics Anonymous, for some it is a spiritual practice, for others it is a new hobby or activity (like running marathons or volunteering), and for others it is learning a new skill, going back to school, or getting a new job. The truth is, the addiction took up a lot of space in their life, and if you remove it, it leaves a hole. You must fill that hole with adaptive, goal-aligned activities to avoid relapse.

So, what does this mean for adolescents who overuse digital media? Just taking away devices or limiting the digital media use is not enough. Parents/caregivers and adolescents must consider what they are going to do to "fill the hole," so to speak, in the adolescent's life. What can the adolescent do with all the time they used to devote to digital media use?

The answer lies in developing alternative activities to help adolescents fill their lives with value and goal-aligned behaviors (it may even be helpful to sit down with your teen and identify their top values and short- and long-term goals to help select alternative activities). Here are a few ideas to consider with your teen as you develop alternative activities:

- Create a list of activities or skills you want to do (or learn!) and explore realistic ways to practice or improve them based on your time and resources. For example: "I really like art and would like to become better at drawing. I can start to decrease the time I would have spent scrolling on a screen with time improving my drawing skills. I will be able to see improvements as I continue to focus on this skill."
- If you are having trouble finding a new skill or activity that does not include a screen, think back to something you used to enjoy and give it another try. For example: "I used to like cooking with my grandmother when I was young. I can start baking again and try to find new things to make."
- Think of ways to track your progress and celebrate your success in new activities. This might also involve reflecting on how far you've come. For example: "When I first learned to play soccer, I could barely kick the ball, now I'm amazing!"
- Ask a friend or family member to join you in cutting down screen time and supporting each other when the urge to pick up a screen is strong.

- If cutting down on screen time feels overwhelming, start by looking at content that has clear start and end times. This will help you become more aware of how much time you're spending on screens and give you natural stopping points to help put the device down and do something else.
- Spending time in nature or getting some exercise can help you feel more grounded and boost your circulation, which can improve both your mood and how your body feels!

Preparing for Backlash or Withdrawal

Changing behavior is hard (just think about how many people struggle with New Year's resolutions, new diets, or new workout routines). Typically, we don't make changes successfully and completely on the first try. Change is more like a process than a one-time event. And changing digital media use is especially complicated because of how it affects the brain.

Reducing excessive screen time can lead to a drop in dopamine (one of the neurochemicals implicated in the experience of reward), which may lead to irritability, sadness, restlessness, emotional outbursts, moodiness, insomnia, headaches, or risky behavior. We call these "withdrawal" symptoms. With regard to behavioral addictions, withdrawal symptoms are defined as "unpleasant feeling states and/or physical effects which occur when the particular activity is discontinued or suddenly reduced."¹ In severe cases, especially when other mental health concerns are present, a reduction or end of digital media use can increase the risk of self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or aggressive behavior. If safety is a concern, seek immediate help.

When preparing to reduce or limit an adolescent's digital media use, it can be helpful to first understand what digital media use *does* for your teen (e.g., helps them socialize, provides an escape from distress, is entertaining, helps them feel worthwhile, gives them a chance to be someone else). Determining the main function of digital media use in the child's life can help in two ways: (a) identify effective replacement activities that meet the same need, and (b) prepare for how the adolescent might respond when digital media use is reduced.

Remember, taking a screen away from an adolescent or reducing their digital media use without alternative activities may lead to emotional and behavioral outbursts. These outbursts can be minimized by clearly explaining the reasons for the change and outlining what the adolescent can do instead (what are the alternative activities?). For example, parents/caregivers can explain that the change in digital media use is not a punishment, but instead, comes from a place of caring for the adolescent. Given how much we now know about the risks associated with excessive digital media use, a change is needed. Parents/caregivers can provide an explanation of how excessive screen time affects the brain, emotional regulation, behaviors, socialization, motivation, and frustration tolerance. This type of psychoeducation can help adolescents understand the "why" behind the behavior change.

It also may be helpful to come up with a plan for how the adolescent might cope with initial withdrawal symptoms (e.g., irritability, emotional volatility, restlessness, frustration, discomfort, cravings). When the adolescent cannot access digital media, how can they cope with the distressing feelings that they might feel? These withdrawal symptoms will not last indefinitely, so it could be helpful to develop a plan to cope with them when the initial change is made. Coping strategies may include: engaging in guided imagery/guided meditation, engaging in exercise or physical activity, calling a friend or family member, writing in a journal, listening to music, creating a gratitude list, being outside in nature, engaging in a spiritual practice, drawing, stretching, engaging in deep breathing exercises or yoga, taking a warm bath, or asking for help.

As parents/caregivers and teens begin to make changes to digital media use, connecting with other families or peers who have similar goals (reducing digital media use) can help the teen feel less isolated and out of place within their friend group or school.

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References

1. Griffiths, M. (2005). A 'components' model of addiction within a biopsychosocial framework. *Journal of Substance Use*, 10, 191-197. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/14659890500114359>

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