

LIVING



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ANALOG TIME

Tips on stepping back from screens and starting a new hobby

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Associated Press

During the winter of 2024, Rachel Martin came to a startling realization: She spent most of her free time staring at screens. "I couldn't really think of hobbies or things that I did that took a break from the digital world," she said.

With pastimes like watching television, playing video games and creating digital art, Mar-

tin, 33, sometimes spent more than 12 hours per day looking at screens. She longed for an analog alternative.

After some trial and error, she found one: journaling with fountain pens and specialty inks. "It's quite a cool tactile experience," she said, and one that unexpectedly turned social when she started attending meetups for fountain pen enthusiasts in her city of Sydney, Australia. "It's something that I definitely

didn't expect to love, but that actually really helped me with going (mostly) screen-free."

Adopting a new hobby can be an effective way to get a break from screens. And as an added bonus, enjoyable pastimes can reduce stress and improve mental and physical health, research suggests.

Finding a screen-free hobby that sticks, though, can be easier said than done. Here's where to start:

A mix of enjoyable activities is fine

Some people feel pressured to find the "ideal" hobby that will perfectly optimize their free time — but there's no such thing, said Sarah Pressman, a professor of psychological science at the University of California, Irvine who has studied leisure time.

"Having a mix of small enjoyable activities — a little bit of pickleball, cooking something new, chatting with a friend over coffee, spending some time in your garden — can have a cumulative effect on your mood and health," she said. "So rather than putting pressure on yourself to find the perfect pastime, just

ask, 'What brings me a little joy today?'"

Similarly, hobbies don't have to fill hours upon hours of time to be beneficial, said Matthew Zawadzki, an associate professor of psychological sciences at the University of California, Merced who has studied hobbies.

Start small by thinking about activities that would be fulfilling for 20, 10 or even five minutes at a time.

"We really need to embrace small engagements with our leisure," he said, particularly given how many other demands there are on our time.

A pastime may not reset your life, "but instead it's going to reset the next hour," Zawadzki said.

Try lots of things

"Test out a few activities for 30 minutes each and just notice how they make you feel," Pressman said. "Think of it like dating. You may have to go on a few first dates before you find your match."

Cast a wide net. Think about how activities you loved as a child could be adapted for adulthood, or about things that you naturally lose track of time while doing, she suggested.

It also can be helpful to consider what you're missing, or want more of, in your daily routine, Zawadzki said. If you feel too sedentary, try a new form of fitness. If you need to get out of your head, pick up an engrossing book. If you feel starved for social connection, join a club or volunteer. If you haven't used your creative muscles in a while, pick up a paintbrush.

"It's about being more intentional about how you use your time," Zawadzki said.

Ask for recommendations

"It's hard to think past what we currently do," Zawadzki said. So, outsource your search.

Just as you'd ask a friend for a book or movie recommendation, ask your loved ones which activities they'd recommend for someone with your interests and tastes. Make sure they're aware of any financial, time or space constraints, too.

Make your hobbies as accessible as screen time...

If you're used to spending your evening in front of the TV, it can be hard to put those hours to new use — even once you've found a rewarding hobby.

"Screens are so easy," said Gabriela Toniello, an associate professor of marketing at Rutgers Business School who has studied leisure time.

Keep your sketchpad or crossword puzzle in plain sight rather than stored away, Pressman suggested, and flow directly from work or dinner into hobby time before you get distracted by screens.

Setting specific goals (not just, "I want to reduce screen time," but something like, "I will read for an hour before bed"), carving out designated time for your activity and enlisting a hobby buddy for accountability can all help you stick to your pastime, Toniello said.

... but don't beat yourself up if the screens sometimes win

Screen time isn't inherently bad, Zawadzki said. Watching a movie with your family can be a bonding activity — especially if you talk about it afterward — and catching up with a juicy TV show on the treadmill may motivate you to exercise.

"Any kind of activity has the potential to be positive," he said. "But you have to optimize it a little bit to serve your goals," and set a cap on how much time you spend vegging out.

Don't be too hard on yourself if you can't totally quit your screen-based hobbies. Toniello's research suggests that viewing leisure time as wasteful can make it less enjoyable and less beneficial.

"Step one is actually experiencing that positivity when you engage in these activities," Toniello said. "The consequences of that are feeling more relaxed, feeling less stressed, feeling happier."

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