

Guidelines Newsletter

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Summer Issue

*Digital Detox and Reconnecting
IRL: Reclaiming Presence in a
Hyperconnected World*

THE NERVOUS SYSTEM KNOWS: SOMATIC SIGNS THAT IT'S TIME TO UNPLUG

BY HODA HASSAN, RMHCI

In an age where screens mediate everything from work to rest to relationships, many people have become fluent in the language of productivity but disconnected from the signals of their own bodies. Mental health providers and clients often dismiss chronic fatigue, restlessness, or difficulty concentrating as simply being “tired,” when in fact, the nervous system may be signaling—subtly but persistently—that it’s time to step away from the digital noise and reconnect with real-life presence.

Digital Overload and the Body's Response

Chronic exposure to digital media has been shown to contribute to cognitive fatigue, emotional dysregulation, and somatic stress responses (Peper & Harvey, 2018). While many are aware of the psychological impacts of digital overuse—such as anxiety, attention fragmentation, and sleep disruption—the somatic effects, including bodily tension and dysregulation, are less often discussed (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006; Levine, 2010; van der Kolk, 2014). Emerging research continues to reinforce what clinicians observe in practice. Just one extra hour of smartphone use in bed was associated with a 59% higher risk of insomnia and about 24 fewer minutes of sleep among young adults (Hjetland et al., 2025). Adolescents who spend more than four hours per day on screens have over twice the odds of experiencing depression ($OR = 2.23$) and anxiety ($OR = 1.85$) compared to peers with minimal screen use (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). Among college students, screen time strongly correlates with poorer sleep quality, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.86 (Sahu et al., 2024). Physical activity and adequate sleep offer protective effects against digital overload (Malik et al., 2022). The body conveys signs of digital fatigue through somatic cues:

- Shallow breathing or breath holding after long periods online (Porges, 2007).
- Jaw and neck tension are common somatic symptoms associated with prolonged screen time, particularly during sustained visual focus and poor ergonomic posture, which are key components of digital eye strain (Sheppard & Wolffsohn, 2018).
- Eye strain and light sensitivity, linked to blue light overexposure (Sheppard & Wolffsohn, 2018).
- Sensory overload, especially in neurodivergent individuals who may already be hypersensitive to visual and auditory stimuli (Robertson & Baron-Cohen, 2017)
- Disembodiment or feeling “floaty” or numb, consistent with nervous system dysregulation (Porges, 2011)
- These physical cues are signs that the nervous system is moving out of the “ventral vagal” state of connection and into a more defensive mode — often unnoticed until burnout occurs (Porges, 2007).

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Recognizing the "Tech Saturation Point"

Rather than waiting for complete depletion, mental health providers can help clients recognize their own somatic threshold – the point at which stimulation begins to override presence and regulation. This aligns with research in somatic psychology, which emphasizes the importance of body-based self-awareness in managing stress (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006; Levine, 2010; Dana, 2018). Here Are a Few Supportive Practices:

- *Somatic Check-Ins:* Mental health providers can encourage clients to build simple awareness into transition points – between sessions, after scrolling, before a video call. Questions may include:
 - *Where do I feel tension right now?*
 - *Am I breathing fully?*
 - *Do I feel grounded or overstimulated?*

Even a few seconds of embodied inquiry can disrupt the autopilot loop and restore choice. Somatic mindfulness supports clients in staying within their window of tolerance, reducing the likelihood of disconnection or dysregulation (Ogden et al., 2006).

- *Breath as Intervention:* Slow breathing – especially with a longer exhale – activates the parasympathetic nervous system and has been shown to lower heart rate and improve vagal tone (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005). A simple practice is the 4-6 breath: inhale for four counts, exhale for six. This can be taught in-session and practiced between appointments as a daily reset.
- *Sensory Grounding Techniques:* Somatic grounding enhances self-regulation by reconnecting with the environment through the senses (Price, 2007). Mental health providers may invite clients to:
 - Press bare feet into the ground (Levine, 2010).
 - Hold a textured object (like a rock or soft cloth) (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006).
 - Notice three sounds, three smells, or three colors in their environment (Badenoch, 2018; Fisher, 2017).
 - These sensory anchors help restore felt presence and reduce screen-induced dissociation (Price, 2007).
- *Rituals to Mark Unplugging:* Without conscious closure, clients often move from task to task – or app to app – without embodied transitions. Rituals can support nervous system regulation by offering intentional punctuation marks. Examples include:
 - Taking three conscious breaths before shutting the laptop (Dana, 2018)
 - Lighting a candle to begin or end the day (Badenoch, 2018)

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- Changing physical posture or location between screen-based tasks (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006)
- These micro-rituals signal safety, grounding, and presence to the body (Van der Kolk, 2014).
- *Embodiment Is the Goal, Not the Escape*: Digital detox doesn't have to mean total disconnection. Instead, it can mean learning to live with technology in a way that honors the intelligence of the body. Mental health providers can support clients – and themselves – in recognizing early signs of dysregulation and building daily practices that restore balance (Levine, 2010; Siegel, 1999). In doing so, mental health providers are not just encouraging people to unplug. They are helping them come home to themselves.

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