

At Lexington event, technology addiction expert David Greenfield advocates for connection



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David Greenfield, founder of the Center for Internet and Technology Addiction in Connecticut, at his event on virtual addiction, Tuesday, June 12 at the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library in Lexington. [Courtesy Photo/Diane McLaughlin]

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Between 200 and 300 times each day on average, people check their smartphones, according to David Greenfield, founder of Connecticut's Center for Internet and Technology Addiction.

For Greenfield, this time spent connecting online – to people, information, games and other ever-changing content – takes away from opportunities to make real human contact.

"Technology has wired us together," Greenfield said. "The problem is, we don't connect."

Greenfield wants to change how people interact with technology. Adjusting our approach to devices will improve quality of life and help those who could develop an addiction, he contends. And, as instances of distracted driving continue to rise, setting limits on technology could save lives.

Greenfield was in Lexington on June 12 to run a workshop sponsored by human services provider Bridgewell's Center for Professional Innovation. The all-day event at the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library helped therapists, social workers, school counselors and other professionals from around the region understand how technology addiction affects both children and adults. Greenfield spoke with the Lexington Minuteman by phone after the event.

Smartphones' powerful pull

Technology does have value, said Greenfield, who is also an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine. He uses his smartphone throughout the day and displays information on screens when meeting with patients.



Greenfield wants people to recognize why they feel compelled to check their phones so often. The smartphone sends frequent notifications of new content, which in turn could reward users with interesting messages, posts or information. But frequent checking has consequences.

“Technology encourages disconnection,” Greenfield said. “The real issue with technology is that it eats up time and alienates people.”

What happens in the brain with technology addiction is no different from what happens with gambling or substance addictions, Greenfield said. But one challenging aspect is that, unlike with many substances, technology is a necessary part of modern society. Smartphone notifications trigger the brain to anticipate the possibility of a quick reward. The new content – messages, posts, photos – may not be rewarding, but the only way to find out is to check.

Most people can change technology behaviors on their own and improve the quality of life. For some people, technology use leads to addiction. With adults, it could affect jobs and relationships. Children could see schoolwork suffer and withdraw from family and friends.

Efforts in Lexington

Some Lexington groups, too, have started addressing technology use. Last year, the Lexington Community Coalition partnered with Temple Emunah to show the film “Screenagers,” which explores how technology affects children’s development. The middle school and high school parent/teacher groups also sponsored a screening of the film earlier this year, along with a panel discussion about the issue.

Lana Bastianutti, a member of the Lexington Community Coalition’s mental health subcommittee, wrote in an email that, like many mental health issues, time and effort will be needed to change people’s perspective on the issue.

“What seems evident from this work thus far,” Bastianutti said, is that “community and schools must rely and lean on each other. Like most things in life, we are stronger together.”

Tips to reduce technology addiction

Keep smartphones out of the bedroom. The smartphone’s presence and the urge to check it could increase stress hormones.

Use an alarm clock instead of the smartphone alarm.

Eliminate screen time one hour before bedtime to avoid negative effects on circadian rhythms and sleep patterns.

Consider software or apps that monitor the amount of time we spend on devices.

Whenever possible, turn off notifications. This will reduce the urge to pick up the smartphone.

Source: Center for Internet and Technology Addiction

Social and family interactions

Greenfield said that to regain time and improve the quality of social interactions, people should set limits for technology use, mindfully approach their devices and develop sustainable practices.

Using smartphones during social interactions sends a message that we're not fully engaged. Greenfield advises people to keep smartphones off the table at restaurants.

"This makes for more nutritious social interactions," Greenfield said.

Family time should also involve technology boundaries, including during meals. Parents need to set these boundaries – and follow them. Greenfield said his center did research showing that parents often use technology during family time, with children modeling this behavior.

Another issue Greenfield identifies is using smartphones to alleviate boredom. Instead, Greenfield wants us to develop more tolerance for the times when we have nothing to do. Boredom can motivate people to make social connections and inspire creativity. Rather than turning to devices, bored children – and adults – should make a list of 100 things to do without screens, Greenfield said.

Giving young children smartphones, so that parents can always connect, could lead to unhealthy behaviors and difficulties with independence, Greenfield said.

"Kids are reliant on technology and parents constantly," he explained. "People mistake that for love and concern."

Developing independence and self-reliance could also help children build resilience to mental health issues, Greenfield said.

Saving lives

Along with improving quality of life, mindful technology practices could also save lives. Distracted driving has become a growing concern across the country. Greenfield said smartphones should not be easily accessible while driving. Because the brain's frontal lobe, which controls judgment and impulse control, might not fully develop until about age 25, young people are especially at risk from distracted driving.

Greenfield recognized that developing conscious, sustainable approaches to technology will take effort.

"This is a process for all of us as a culture, a country and a society," he said.



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