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Living Arts

Unplug Your Life: Short-Circuit Infowhelm

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Do you spend hours surfing the web, answering e-mails, texting, tweeting or blogging on social networking sites, even when you're at work?

Do you take cell phone calls or texts no matter where or with whom you are?

Do you listen to music or podcasts on your iPod from breakfast to bedtime?

If you answer "yes" to at least one of these questions, you're far from alone these days. But if you often feel wired, frustrated, exhausted or overwhelmed after spending hours plugged into electronic devices, you may be experiencing what I call "Infowhelm."

I coined this term in 2006 to describe the feeling of overwhelm from all the stimulation we absorb in our constantly plugged-in lives. Infowhelm has been escalating nearly four decades since futurist/author Alvin Toffler first wrote about information overload in *Future Shock* and *The Third Wave*. In a 2008 global survey of 1000 large organizations by market info/analysis firm IDC, 75 percent of workers suffered from information overload and 45 percent felt "overwhelmed." Marketing expert/author Dave Lakhani claimed in 2005 that we received more mental and visual stimulation in one day than our great-grandparents in 1900 absorbed in a year. In 2009, with the evolution of YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, podcasts, blogs and web-TV, analysts at knowledge economy research firm Basex believe that we now create more content each day than "an entire population of the planet could consume in a month."

Information overload also costs the U.S. economy \$900 billion annually, according to Basex, in "lower productivity and throttled innovation." It is such a big concern that the first Information Overload Day was held last month. Ironically, IO Day was an eight-hour web conference sponsored by firms like Microsoft and Dow Jones plus Information Overload Research Group, a coalition of academic and business researchers and technologists dedicated to reducing information overload.

In 2006, Time magazine's Mind-Body Issue noted that e-mail and cell phones were already beginning to "drive us to distraction." According to psychiatrist/ADD expert Edward Hallowell, author of *CrazyBusy* and *Driven to Distraction*, we spend too much time "frazzing" (doing frantic, inefficient multi-tasking with the delusion that we're getting things done) and "screen sucking" (wasting time online). People are increasingly addicted to "infosnacking:" randomly nibbling bytes of news, e-mails and web info throughout the day. All of this input and constant interruption contributes to Infowhelm.

I realized that I was Infowhelmed after avoiding my e-mail for nearly two weeks. When I finally went online, it took me two days to read, file or delete all of the e-mails that had accumulated. My experience was echoed in law professor Rosa Brooks' January 2006 LA Times Op-Ed essay about her love-hate relationship with e-mail. Rosa once thought e-mail would "bring absent friends closer and enable us all to communicate so much more efficiently, quickly and deeply." But she became inundated with over 200 e-mails a day, mostly spam or lawyer jokes sent by friends who wrongly thought she'd enjoy them.

Brief exchanges via computer or cell phone have also replaced talking with people face to face.



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Our conversational style is now fast and furious as people rush around chatting on cells or texting and tweeting. But they are often oblivious to people nearby who are forced to listen to their one-sided conversations. This is also true when iPoders commune with their tunes to the exclusion of people around them who feel unimportant and/or invisible.

Our attention spans began shrinking when bullet-point e-mails became common and have gotten much worse due to texting and tweeting. Not only are our thumbs aching now but so are our brains. Hallowell cites in *Driven to Distraction* that Americans began exhibiting Attention Deficit Trait in 1994. Similar to ADD, ADT makes people frantic in certain situations or places—like the office for stressed-out corporate executives or at home for exhausted moms.

Being interrupted by the constant demands of others and/or high tech devices literally drains adrenaline and locks us into “fight or flight” mode, making it impossible to relax and recharge. Our obsession with high tech toys and tools tends to unbalance us instead of freeing up more time to enjoy life. We’re also paying the high price of choosing high tech over high touch by experiencing deeper levels of anxiety than ever before.

By listening primarily to loud sounds through earbuds and Bluetooths, we’ve also stopped hearing nature’s symphony of wind, birds and crickets. By focusing on TV, computers and tiny cell phone screens, we no longer daydream, gaze out windows to watch the world around us or notice the clouds drifting by.

Infowhelm is likely to escalate as even more visual content—including commercials—gets beamed to our iPods and cell phones. Soon we won’t be able to stop the flood of unwanted messages invading our mind-space—unless we unplug!

I don’t advocate trashing all computers or cell phones. But I do urge everyone to seek a balance of high tech and high touch before we can’t stop long enough anymore to smell the roses or gaze at the moon.

The concept of high tech/high touch was originally posed by author/researcher John Naisbitt in his 1982 bestseller *Megatrends*. According to a Publishers Weekly review, “Naisbitt sees Americans trapped in what he calls a ‘Technology Intoxication Zone,’ and he urges people to unplug their laptops long enough to rediscover the simplicity of starry nights and snowfalls, and remember what it means to be human.”

I emphatically agree. As a Life and Soul Coach specializing in conscious balance for life and soul evolution, I invite you to unplug from your machines and recharge your natural energy at least once a week. Try spending “face-time” with people you care about—or at least phone them instead of e-mailing or texting so you can listen to their voices and they can hear yours. Our voices contain emotional energy which is absent in texts and tweets.

You can also balance Infowhelm easily and quickly by just tuning into nature: Walk on the beach or take a hike. Notice the moon’s phases as it evolves from new to full and back again each month. Enjoy the seasonal cycles of the Earth. The world’s energy flows in natural cycles and humans were not designed to operate 24/7 like the Internet. We need regular down-time to rejuvenate, relax and refocus.

Psychology researcher Marc Berman, co-author of a University of Michigan study on memory and attention, discovered that being around traffic, billboards and crowds is distracting and negatively affects memory, as does constantly listening to iPods. He suggests spending time at parks or the beach to calm your brain and increase your focus.

We can also tune into natural frequencies by paying attention to the four elements—earth, air, water and fire—in our daily lives. As building blocks of energy, they’re metaphors for our physical world, mental processes, emotional feelings and spiritual connections. Our high tech toys and tools primarily express air or mental energy. So if you feel off-center, recharge by finding new ways to tap into the full spectrum of earth/physical, water/emotional and fire/spiritual vibrations.

Tuning into natural energy patterns wherever we can is a highly effective antidote for Infowhelm. When we unplug regularly even for a few hours, we remember how to move at a more peaceful pace, communicate with more emotional depth, and pay more attention to what we see and feel. Imagine how energizing, balanced and calm our lives will be if we all consciously tune into each other and the world around us again!

This article was adapted from Barbara Schiffman's chapter in 101 Great Ways to Improve Your Life, published in March 2006 at [www.SelfGrowth.com](#). Barbara Schiffman, CHt, is a Life and Soul Coach and a Certified Hypnotherapist. A spiritual synthesist who blends astrology, natural elements, tarot archetypes and guided imagery, she helps groups and individuals evolve from the inside out. Find info on her hypnotherapy, teleclasses, workshops, books, guided imagery CDs and other resources at [www.hypnosynergy.com](#) or [www.yourlifeandsoul.com](#) or call

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