

We need a digital sabbath

THE arrival of smart phones, tablets and similar digital devices has revolutionised our life. They have made it possible to have instant communication with families, friends and businesses across the globe and created the 'selfie generation' with instant sharing of photos and videos on social media. Web-surfing, mobile servers and an enormous range of applications has ensured that education, entertainment and knowledge are widely available and easily accessible.

Smart phones and portable electronic devices have become indispensable, so much so that many users have become increasingly dependent on them and can't

resist the temptation to look at them every few minutes. Somehow it feels as if life is just not possible without these devices. While we all know that our digital devices have limitless advantages, it still puzzles us how their destructive misuse and abuse can outweigh the benefits.

At home, on the street, in planes, trains, coaches and cars, we see people — mostly youngsters — staring into their devices while they are having a conversation with the person beside them. It is as if we are covered in a digital dust and enjoy suffering from this digital pollution.

A task group set up by Devon County Council to look at children and young

people's well-being and emotional health identified that social media was the highest ranked adverse effect, followed by domestic violence and substance misuse. A research report by NSPCC states that 39% of boys in England aged 14-17 regularly watched pornography (STIR, 2015) and in 2013 the BBC claimed that 300,000 attempts were made in the previous year at the Houses of Parliament to access pornographic websites.

Recent brain studies suggest that excessive screen time can become addictive. Such an addiction increases the levels of GABA neurotransmitter in the

brain causing anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation and other mental and physical health complications.

Our brains have evolved with an instinct and disposition for curiosity and excitement. That is why 'breaking news' and social media 'gossip' grasps our attention so much more quickly than routine information. It is this natural curiosity and excitement that drives us to look at digital devices so often, and risk eventually becoming addicted to them. Even when we are alone, we have an internal inquisitiveness about what others are doing and saying. We are pushing natural alertness and vigilance

to breaking point to feed our curiosity and excitement.

We need to make the best use of our digital devices and guard against becoming addicted to them. We must ensure they remain useful and that we use them for better rather than allow them to overwhelm us. One of the ways to achieve this is to have a digital sabbath, to put away all the digital devices once a week and spend time with people face to face. "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work" (Gen 2:2).

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