

LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

ADDICTIVE TECHNOLOGY

The concepts of self-care, life balance and mindfulness remain extreme challenges for legal professionals. Relentless workloads, rigid deadlines, clients' expectations and the overall pressures of practicing law are more challenging than ever.

In my personal experience, perhaps no single development has increased pressure on lawyers more so than advances in communications technology. A hyperflow of information comes at lawyers via "screens" (smartphones, iPads and computers) that they constantly monitor all hours of the day and night.

We hear a lot about the opioid epidemic and the perils of addiction to drugs. But there is another "addiction" that is even more widespread — Addictive Technology. It, too, can be deadly. Smartphones have significantly increased traffic deaths.¹

Social psychologist Dr. Adam Alter takes on this topic in his 2017 book, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*. According to Alter, many of us are literally addicted to modern digital products: "In the past, we thought of addiction in terms of being hooked on chemical substances. But now we are seeing an epidemic of behavioral addictions."

In the 2017 *New York Times* article, "Why We Can't Look Away From Our Screens,"² Alter speaks further about addiction to digital devices and social media. Surveys indicate that 60 percent of people keep their smartphones next to their beds and 50 percent check emails during the night.

Smartphones deliver a constant stream of addictive media. Many people's lives have been disrupted by an obsession to continuously monitor incoming information — texts, emails, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, national and local news, weather, and all that advertising pointed at us personally based on our profiles.

According to Alter, an addicted person's dopamine brain activity looks the same for a heroin user, a slot machine player and a video game player. He also finds it telling that in a 2010 interview Steve Jobs said his children didn't have iPads, and that many Silicon Valley titans refuse to let their children near devices. One private school in the Bay Area does not allow any tech devices — no iPhones or iPads — and 75 percent of the parents who send their children there are tech executives.

In general, our very concept of rest and relaxation has been altered. For many, "quiet time" includes a smartphone being monitored and always within reach. If you want to take your pulse on just how "addicted" to technology you may be, test your comfort level with being away from all technology.

Can you leave your smartphone at home while running errands? What about turning it off at night, or at least not checking emails or texts after 6 p.m.? Can you leave your smartphone in the car while in a restaurant or at the movies? For some, thoughts of being "off the grid" for more than minute produces high anxiety.

The younger generation may not believe it but people led enjoyable lives for centuries with no instant access to information. Not that long ago, a car ride meant being in the "present moment" and focused on the world around you instead of being focused on trying not to rear-end another vehicle while managing your smartphone.

Alter suggests that people need to deliberately carve out time for a return to mindfulness: "In general, I'd say find more time to be in natural environments, to sit face-to-face with someone in a long conversation with no technology in the room. There should be times of the day where it looks like the 1950s or where you are sitting in a room and you can't tell what era you're in. You shouldn't always be looking at screens."

This whole issue is tough for lawyers. Their interest in information is supercharged compared to the general public. Deadline-driven and often on the edges of their professional seats, lawyers want work-related information as soon as possible. In between work-related communications, they fully engage in all of the other information streams that have the general population hooked. It's a double-whammy.

Some lawyers are becoming overwhelmed because they either don't realize, or don't believe, it is perfectly acceptable to set boundaries. Everyone has the right to unplug for a while each day, take a break, and be mindful in the present moment without any interruptions. Your smartphone can run meditation and mindfulness apps that support well-being, but it requires the discipline to silence and ignore other phone functions. The best medicine is to experience some of your life each day without a smartphone around.

If you need help with technology addiction or would like to know more about setting healthy boundaries and practicing mindfulness, JLAP can help. Call (985)778-0571, email jlap@louisianajlap.com, or visit the web at: www.louisianajlap.com. All communications are confidential as a matter of law.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Smartphones are Killing Americans, But Nobody's Counting*, Bloomberg Oct. 2017, Stock, Lambert & Ingold.

2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/science/technology-addiction-irresistible-by-adam-alter.html>.

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