Healthy tech habits
Practice safe tech

Technology is vital to everyday tasks, but our dependence on technology can turn into a habit that prevents productivity during school and work days.

New research projects the number of emails sent each day will grow to 206 billion by 2017 from 191 billion in 2014. Research also suggests the stress of dealing with over-stuffed inboxes shortens our breath, speeds our hearts, and spikes our blood pressure – often without us noticing. Long-term stress associated with technology use can lead to teeth-grinding, diabetes, heart disease, and depression. At Stanford's Calming Technology Lab, researchers observed that even simple web searches caused people to take shorter breaths, or hold their breath entirely, restricting oxygen to their brain.

So much of our technology usage is driven by habit and tends to be semi-conscious or unconscious. Schoolwork is often not to blame. Instead, technology stress arises mainly from the urgency we feel to keep tabs on ever-expanding virtual social lives.

Learn to intentionally set your attention – what do I need to do <u>at this moment</u>? Learn to make technology work <u>for</u> you, not <u>against</u> you.

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Work within your attention span

Before we talk about technology, it's important to know your own individual attention span. With all the fun distractions and games available in the digital age, is it any wonder that many students find it difficult to focus attention for long periods of time?

Rather than becoming frustrated about lack of focus, learn to work within the limits of your attention span.

First, find the limits of your attention for a particular task or subject. Can you stay focused for 10 minutes? 20 minutes? Try setting a regular 5-minute timer, and when it goes off, ask yourself if you are still engaged in the task. Mark down when your attention begins to wane.

Once you have established your attention span for a course, divide your work into chunks that will take that long to complete.

For example: You have about a 30-minute attention span for working on a case study in your Commerce class. Divide the project into reading the assignment for 30 minutes, then finding 3 important research articles for 30 minutes, etc.

Take 5 minute breaks between work sessions.

Use a timer to keep you on track, both for your working sessions and for your breaks. You can set up your phone to help you, or search for an online timer that will time your work sessions and breaks.

TIP: Do your hardest work (the most difficult stuff, the boring stuff) at the time of day when you are most alert.

Use of technology during study sessions

You can improve focus during study sessions by simply removing unnecessary technology from your workspace. Ask yourself: **Do I need my phone or computer <u>right now</u> for this work?**
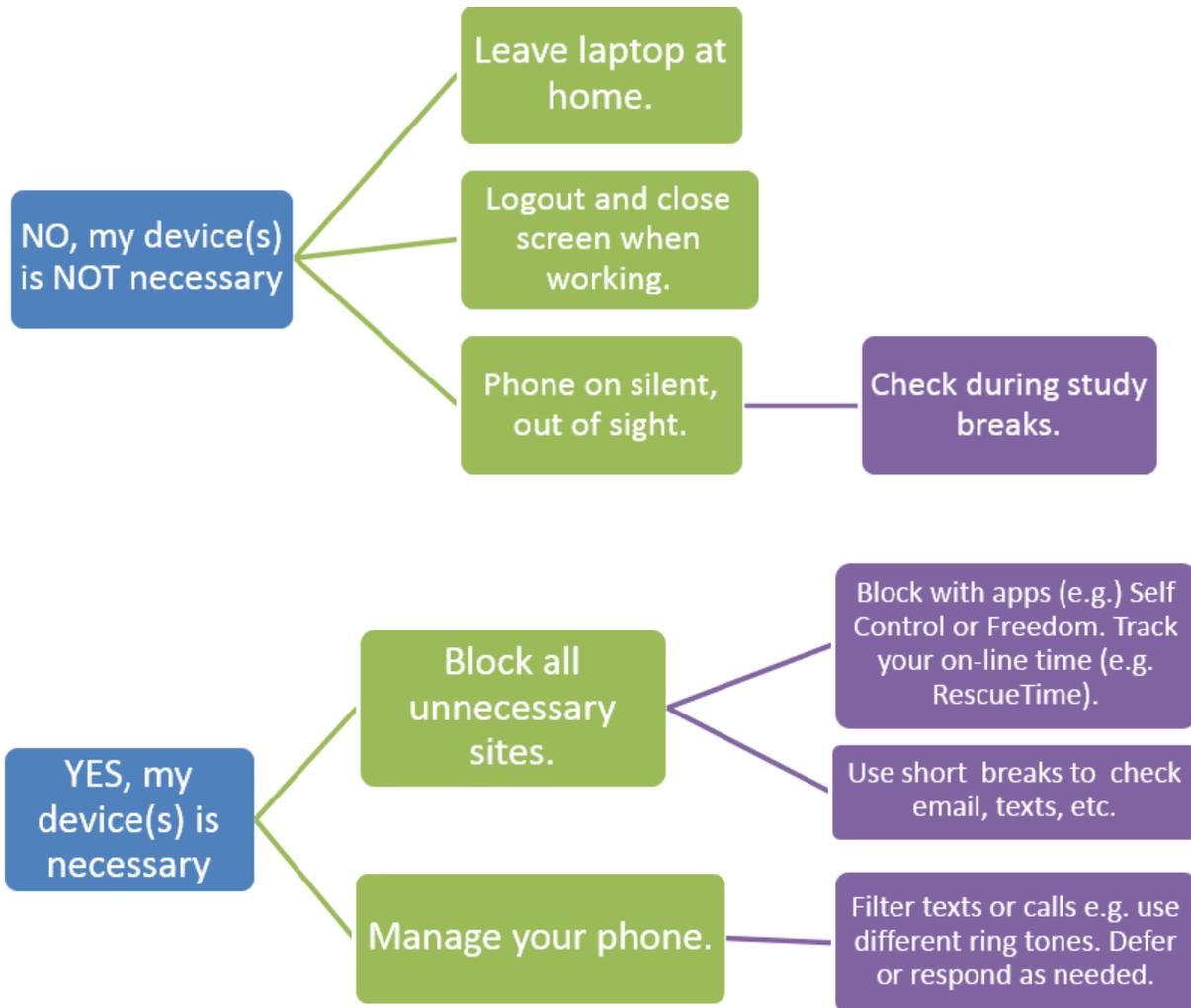
Remember those 5-minute breaks we mentioned earlier?

If you want to check your phone or email during break, remember to time yourself so you don't get lost in a digital 'rabbit hole' – but feel free to check your texts, guilt-free, as your 5-minute break! Try to alternate breaks between physical activity (going for a walk, stretching) and using technology (checking your phone) so that you have a chance to recharge physically, too.

When the break is over, look back at the above diagram. **If your device is not necessary, turn it off and put it out of sight.**

Analyze your work area

Do you have a place where you can work uninterrupted (other than for scheduled breaks?)

Are your supplies close at hand?

Are you comfortable (but not too comfortable?) → Think 'good lighting and comfortable chair'

Don't study on your bed – it will make you sleepy!

Where are your devices? (If you don't need them, have you left them at home or put them away?)

Tips for making your work area distraction-free

Turn off technology

- This includes your phone, iPod, and wireless connection
- If you need to be online to complete your work, block distracting pages or use software to help you (see our list of online tools)
- Put everything you do not need (phone, music) out of sight

Set specific times to check texts and emails

- When you are working, check your phone and email only at specific times during the day, such as after breakfast, lunch, and dinner
- Set a timer to remind yourself to return to work
- You may want to combine your email check with your planner check
- Let friends and family know that you are busy with school and will only be in contact at certain times of day
- **Think of it this way**: before email and cellphones were invented, people were only expected to check their mailbox once a day! Perhaps you, too, can begin the habit of checking your digital 'mailboxes' at 2-3 scheduled times per day

Use white noise to minimize distractions

- See http://www.simplynoise.com

Keep everything you need close at hand (supplies, snacks, etc.)

Distraction pad

Use a distraction pad to write down wandering thoughts and to-do items, like "Have I received that important email yet?" or "Will I remember to text my friend later about going out?"

Getting distracting thoughts out of your head by writing them down on paper can help you focus on the task at hand. You can always get to the to-do items on your distraction pad later.

Set aside a specific time each evening to review your distraction pad

- Some items may be trivial and can be forgotten
- Some items may be important – turn these into specific actions and add them to your to-do list
- Discuss ongoing, distressing thoughts with someone

As an alternative, keep a running tally of when you find yourself getting distracted

- If you notice yourself off task, make a check
- Drawing attention to off task thoughts and behaviour in a concrete way can help avoid them

Look for patterns. Do your thoughts wander when you are tired? Hungry? Restless? Worried?

Think about your improving your health habits and/or talking to someone about your anxiety.

Engage with your work

It is much easier to maintain intense focus if you are interested in the task at hand! (This is why a five-minute visit to Twitter can unexpectedly turn into an hour of fascinating articles.)

You may be able to harness this concentration by getting interested in your courses. Active studying can improve your concentration as well as improve the quality of your studying.

- Ask yourself questions.
- Relate the information to your personal experience.
- Think about the real world implications.
- Make up your own examples.

Examples:

- This reminds me of…..
- This is similar to what I learned in my other class…..
- I wonder what would happen if…….

Study with a friend

Sometimes, students find it useful to have someone else help them stay on task and avoid unhelpful technology. Studying with someone else can help you to re-focus if you find yourself distracted while studying. You can also help *them* focus (for example, if you find them using Facebook, gently remind them that they're here to study!)

Just seeing a friend working can be a great way to stay aware of the task at hand.

A friend can also help you stay on task when you have a project to complete. Give him or her permission to remind you (when necessary) that you promised **not** to go on social media while studying for your upcoming midterm.

During weekly check-ins, he or she can hold you accountable for your progress. Tell them what you have done over the week, and what you want to accomplish next week.

Use self-talk to stay on task

Self-talk is one of the most powerful tools you can use to get started and stay on track. Congratulate yourself for staying on track, or remind yourself where your attention should be. Practice is the key to using self-talk effectively.

Over time, you can develop a habit of talking to yourself that keeps you motivated and focused.

Examples:

- If I get started now, I will feel less stressed later in the term.
- I'm really making progress on this paper.
- I have been on task for 10 minutes without distraction.
- What is **most** important right now?
- How long have I been on this website?

Online tools to help you stay focused

Anti-Social

http://anti-social.cc/

- Block the sites that waste your time
- Windows, Mac, and Ubuntu compatible
- $15 (U.S.) one-time fee

Buddhify 2

http://buddhify.com/

- Guided meditation tracks designed specifically for when you are working or browsing online
- iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch
- $2.99 (U.S.) one-time fee

Do Nothing for 2 Minutes

http://DoNothingFor2Minutes.com/

- The site gets visitors to stare at a sunset-lit ocean for 120 seconds.
- Notification will read FAIL if user presses keys or uses mouse while staring
- Windows and Mac compatible
- Free

Inner Balance

https://itunes.apple.com/ca/app/inner-balance/id569278747?mt=8

- An ear sensor connects to your smartphone and monitors your heart rate. If the beats are too fast, you are prompted to breathe deeply while being cheered by upbeat on-screen messages and tracked by a progress report
- iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch
- Free app, and $129.00 (U.S.) one-time fee for sensor

F.lux

https://justgetflux.com/

- Adjusts the colour of the computer screen to match the time of day, dimming in the evening and brightening at sunrise
- Free download for Windows, also available for Mac, Linux, and iPhone/iPad

Focus@will

https://www.focusatwill.com/

- A subscription service that plays neuroscience based music while you work and claims to help the average listener hold their attention for 400% longer than usual
- Windows and Mac compatible
- Try it for Free then pay subscription for less than 13 cents a day

Focusbooster

http://focusboosterapp.com/

- Helps you time and set goals for work sessions
- Counts and tallies all complete sessions
- Free

Freedom

http://macfreedom.com/

- Prevents you from accessing any part of the Web for up to 8 hours
- Windows, Mac, and Android compatible
- $10 one-time fee

LeechBlock 0.6.6

https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/leechblock/

- Blocks those time-wasting sites that can suck the life out of your working day
- Mozilla Firefox add-on
- Free

Self-Control

http://visitsteve.com/made/selfcontrol/

- Blocks access to distracting websites, etc. for a set period of time that you choose – while still allowing you to access the internet
- Available on OS X only
- Free

Simply Noise

http://www.simplynoise.com

- Blocks out noise to minimize distraction
- Variety of sounds available: traditional white noise, thunderstorm, waves
- 'Pay what you can' donation requested at time of download

StayFocused

https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/stayfocusd/laankejkbhbdhmipfmgcngdelahlfoji?hl=en

- Restricts the amount of time you can spend browsing time-wasting sites on Google Chrome
- Requires Google Chrome web browser
- Free

The Pomodoro Technique

http://pomodorotechnique.com/

- Use a timer to keep yourself on track, both for your working sessions and for your breaks
- Free Online timer for 25 minute sessions (http://www.online-stopwatch.com/pomodoro-timer/)
- Order 8 timers for $59.27
- Order timer + technique book for $23.70

Time Doctor

http://www.timedoctor.com

- Monitors & tracks computer usage, including time spent on 'unproductive' sites
- Sends messages to user if work seems to have slowed down
- Free trial for 30 days but requires a low subscription afterwards

Time Out

http://www.dejal.com/timeout

- Set a pre-determined amount of time and Time Out will remind you to take a 5-10 minute break at that time
- Macs only
- Free