Dear Alice,

I became quite the hermit after high school graduation, and noticed myself being a terrible internet junkie who spends hours online.

I realized this was making me feel really irritable after about a year of it, so I started visiting old and new friends last week, and plan to do so this week as well. I'm trying to limit myself on the internet to one hour a day or avoiding it completely.

I'm a young fellah, very able bodied, and I know this. I want to know more of what's out there. I need ideas of how to keep myself moving and build up enough momentum to get out of the small rut. You only live once, right?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Fire up your browser, and a world of shopping, music, games, news, and friends is just a few clicks away. In many ways, the internet has helped build connections between people or communities that may have never had access to one another? online dating, community forums, and social and professional networking are just a few examples. However, as you described, too much time on the internet can also run the risk of taking away from other aspects of offline life, such as your friends, family, or job? frequent internet use becomes a problematic behavior when it starts to cause the user to feel unhappy or distressed. The good news is there are plenty of strategies that might help you unplug, and you?ve already taken some of the first steps by cutting back on your screen time!

Given the growing ubiquity of computers and Wi-Fi capable tablets and smartphones, it can be challenging to disconnect. And with so much accessible information and entertainment available at your fingertips all the time, it?s no surprise that staying online can be a serious distraction. Have you considered if there have been any changes in your life since graduation that may have made an online retreat more appealing? Have there been any big changes to your schedule now that you might be spending less time in a classroom? Do you have any concerns about the next stage in your life, like figuring out what major or degree program you might be interested in pursuing, finding a new job, having close friends move away, or having to move somewhere new yourself? Are there any sports or hobbies that you used to enjoy before graduation that you haven?t been engaging with as much lately? Thinking through some of these questions may help you reflect a bit on the recent uptick in your internet habits,
and might help you figure out some new activities that can help get you out of this slump.

As you've already done, acknowledging that your internet use is having a negative impact on your life is the first step towards changing your relationship with your technology. Visiting friends and limiting your time online can be helpful strategies to keep you away from the keyboard. Here are some other suggestions you may find helpful:

- **Keep track of time.** Consider using a journal to track how much time you spend online. Keeping a physical log can be easier and more accurate than trying to remember ball park estimates. Each time you log on, make a note in your journal of how long you spend online, what you do in that time, and your feelings during and after. How much time do you spend on messaging platforms, email, games, or other websites? Is there a particular day or time that you are online a lot, like late at night or on weekends? You can also use the journal to record and compare time spent on other daily activities (school, work, meals, sleeping, etc.) versus online. This information can help you set realistic goals for reining in your internet use and get a better picture of what aspects of your internet use warrant change. For example, while spending a few hours answering professional emails or job hunting may be productive and necessary, you may want to consider cutting back on some of the hours you spend trying to beat the highest score on the latest smartphone game or surfing for funny cat videos.

- **Make a plan.** Your plan to limit time on the web to an hour a day is a great start! It may help to schedule a specific time slot when it's okay to log on, for example one hour after dinner. You may even want to set a timer at the opposite side of the room? when your time's up, you'll have to get up from the computer to turn off the alarm. You might also see if any software and applications may also allow you to set usage limits. Alternatively, you could also schedule your internet session before another appointment or commitment so you have a concrete reason that holds you accountable to signing off on time. It's usually easier to stop doing something if there's an alternative activity planned.

- **Reorganize your digital space.** Consider making the distractions less attractive? if you're online to do research or work, only keep tabs or windows open that are immediately relevant to your work. Try out an ad blocker application to avoid the barrage of click-ables, log out of websites completely when you're done browsing, and disable or mute the volume on your devices to minimize notification sounds. If you're doing work that doesn't require that you're online, you could even switch off your Wi-Fi connectivity. This might help you focus on being productive when you are online and avoid being lured into the virtual rabbit hole. Also consider deleting bookmarks or shortcuts to your favorite distractions. If you tend to use your smartphone as an escape portal, move the most enticing items into other folders or delete the apps entirely? if it takes more time and energy to get to your favorite online getaways, it may help you to stick to your plan.

- **Stay busy.** Try to think of other fun ways to occupy your time. Do you enjoy playing a sport, reading, or cooking? Perhaps now would be the perfect time to pick up new hobby or skill. Consider offline ways to connect with people? for example, you could send a letter to a friend the old fashioned way or make a regular phone date with a relative. Rekindling existing connections with your community or building new ones can also be an empowering way to stay involved? you could join a recreational sports team or look to local community organizations for volunteer opportunities. Giving back or paying it forward can be a great outlet to lift yourself out of that rut!

- **Reach out to friends and family.** Your instinct to reconnect with friends is right on point. Spending so much time online might make you feel out of touch with friends and
family in their offline lives. Cultivating real-world relationships has several advantages, including the potential for a deeper sense of connectedness and camaraderie with friends and family that may sometimes feel fleeting or artificial online. Having fun with your friends may also put a spring back in your step and help you feel less irritable. And, as an added bonus, spending time with friends face-to-face will help to fill up your day and leave less time for you to go online.

Some people also find it helpful to talk with a health professional about behavioral changes. During a visit, you could have a solution-oriented conversation about the various aspects of your internet use and discuss other ways to reduce your time online. If you’ve been keeping a log of your behavior, bringing your journal to your meeting might help you start that conversation. If you’re concerned that your internet use feels out of your control, or your attempts to cut back are unsuccessful, consider asking your health care provider for a referral to a mental health professional who has experience with compulsive behavior or internet abuse. These specialists may have more targeted strategies to address your needs.

It may take time to untangle yourself from the Net, but you’re off to a positive start by noticing that your internet use can make you feel irritable and isolated. Logging off more often in favor of connecting with and checking in with people you care about can be helpful first steps toward developing a healthier relationship with the internet. Hopefully limiting your time online and hanging out with friends will help you unplug and unwind!

Alice!

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Always staring at the computer screen? Is this hazardous to my health? [9]
Help! I think I have a TV show obsession! [10]
Oh no! I’ve got FOMO (fear of missing out)! [11]

Resources

Alice! Health Promotion (Morningside) [12]
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [13]
Center for Student Wellness (CUMC) [14]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [15]

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