

Need a Digital Detox? Here Are 3 Tips to Get Started.

A couple of weeks ago when my fall semester ended, I broke my informal YouTube fast. After only a few days, I was reminded of why I enjoy leaving it alone.

Sites like YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter catch the viewer by stimulating a seemingly never-ending desire for more. It's like the childhood hiding-under-the covers-with-a-flashlight urge ("one more chapter, one more chapter..."), except the stimulation of watching videos or scrolling is probably less helpful than that of [reading a book](#). Sites like YouTube tend to pull the viewer in, snatching up an hour where 15 minutes was intended.

I can't say, though, that YouTube has been uniformly unhelpful; in fact, the discovery of several recent resources on that platform have helped me increase my productivity and be more aware of why and how certain distractions affect productivity.

Take [this video](#), for example. Tantalizingly titled "How I Trained My Brain to Like Doing Hard Things" (how could a philosophy student *not* click on that?), the video explores the effects of dopamine on the human brain.

The video explains that, contrary to popular opinion, dopamine is not primarily a pleasure molecule; rather, it's a chemical that makes us desire certain tasks or activities. The greater the activity's perceived reward, the higher amount of dopamine is released. Thus, it's generally not hard to scroll through comedy sketches for a focused hour, because the brain anticipates an immediate reward, and it releases dopamine accordingly.

Here's the thing that I hadn't thought about: People can train

themselves to run on lower amounts of dopamine. In this way, it's kind of like alcohol, drugs, or [other addictions](#): The less someone has of it, the less they're wired to want or need it. For dopamine, then, people who are used to lower amounts don't require as much mental novelty. Conversely, people whose minds are trained to run on high levels of dopamine find it harder to complete low-dopamine tasks.

And even in my own experience, I find this to be disturbingly true. Sitting down to write this article, even, has felt extremely difficult: Each time I try to focus, I feel myself craving the quick dopamine shock that bite-sized videos or social media posts have trained me to desire. I want novelty, and focusing on an extended argument isn't novel.

Understanding my own persistent desire for distraction, I've learned a variety of ways that I can help stop myself from investing too much time in productivity-lowering activities. Here are just a few:

1. **Block sites for certain hours.** I've occasionally used [LeechBlock](#), an online browser extension that allows me to target specific sites and limit when I can access them, though other apps or extensions could work well, too. With these extensions, I can open entertainment sites for specific lengths of time on specific days. This preserves the essential parts of my week for work, while also allowing me to explore my favorite sites when I have downtime.
2. **Keep sites bookmarked, and stick to those bookmarks.** Occasionally there's something on YouTube that I think would be a genuine benefit to me: an explanation of church architecture, for example, or productivity suggestions that are tailored to the way I naturally think. I'll pin these videos to my "Watch Later" playlist. Later, I can click directly to the videos I know will benefit me—thus eliding the danger of binge-watching more [frivolous](#) channels.

3. **Abandon sites entirely.** This might feel extreme, but—in my experience—it is oh-so-worth-it. Most notably, I try to abandon YouTube during the academic year; on a smaller scale, I’ll set aside certain weeks in which I won’t go on social media, listen to certain types of music, or go online aside from what’s necessary for school and work. The abandonment doesn’t have to go on indefinitely, but it weans my mind off the dopamine hits I so easily learn to crave. Sometimes, even, I’ll find that my life works a whole lot better *without* the distractions I once found inevitable, and I’ll try to extend my avoidance for longer.

Whatever your strategy, it’s always helpful to [ask the question](#) “What genuine problem is X trying to solve?” Or, to phrase it another way, is such-and-such a media outlet, news source, or video service filling a genuine void in your life? For YouTube and me, the answer is usually “no,” and I’m happy to leave it be.

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