

The School of the Unconformed Communal Digital Fast

A game plan based on Cal Newport's 'Digital Minimalism' strategy

1. COMMIT TO A COMMUNAL FAST PERIOD

- ❖ The Lenten period is a particularly suitable time for a digital fast as a large, world-wide community is committing to a period of constraint and reflection.
- ❖ Be sure to plan your fast, specify your usage rules, and make a list of activities that will replace your time otherwise used on digital devices.
- ❖ Committing to a fast together with a spouse, your family, a friend, a small group, or church community, will allow you to support each other, and make it more likely that you will succeed in sustaining your new habits.

Specify your usage rules

- ❖ Before you start the fast, write out when and how you will allow yourself to use your phone, computer, or other device. Being too vague or too strict can set you up for failure. Think about which uses are not optional for the duration of the fast. Be specific, for example:
 - I will check my e-mail at _____ and at _____.
 - I will use my phone to arrange a meeting via text.
 - I will use my laptop when writing an article.
 - Etc.
- ❖ Inform family and friends about your digital fast and when you will be checking your messages.
- ❖ Compose an auto-reply for your e-mail indicating the expected time frame for your responses.

Abstain and reframe

- ❖ Use this fasting time to abstain from digital-drip practices. This may initially lead to discomfort, restlessness, and may cause anxiety.

- ❖ Consider leaving your device at home whenever possible, especially if you are out for a walk.
- ❖ When taking your device along, do not keep it on your body. Place it in a bag out of easy reach.
 - ➔ At home, put your laptop away on a shelf, or in a closet; keep it out of sight.
 - ➔ Use a watch and agenda to keep track of time and appointments
 - ➔ Create new visual and practical cues around your home that you can turn to when restless (if you were born anywhere before 1990, just use whatever strategies were part of your life before the Great Rewiring).

These might include:

- ❖ A journal or notebook
- ❖ Books
- ❖ Printed articles
- ❖ Knitting, crochet work, sewing
- ❖ List of handy tasks to be completed around the home or garden

2. ENGAGE in analog social connections, solitude, walking, physical work, other high-quality, technology-free activities

- ❖ Solitude - Cal Newport emphasizes that time alone with your thoughts and experiences helps to 'clarify hard problems, to regulate emotions, build moral courage, and to strengthen relationships.'
- ❖ Walking - Go for a walk daily. Even ten minutes is helpful, but the longer the better. Consider leaving your phone at home.
- ❖ Nurture analog relationships - As Sherry Turkle notes, '...face-to-face communication is the most human - and humanizing- thing we do.'
- ❖ Work with your hands, create

3. **DECIDE** which technology you allow back into your life

- ❖ Determine which digital device use will actually serve your greater vision of life. Thus, merely being convenient or having a perk is not enough to make the cut.
- ❖ Delete social media (or if you must use it, delete junk food and keep whole grains - see Stay Grounded).
- ❖ Move to a flip phone/light phone/home phone if possible.

4. **FORM COMMUNITY** with like-minded people

- ❖ Maintaining digital discipline or abstinence is challenging when surrounded by an ocean of people who think your efforts are crazy or futile. Conversely, it is helpful and strengthening when you connect with like-minded people, who are also working towards 'cognitive liberty'.
- ❖ Parents need to have active involvement in establishing phone-free friend communities for their children:
 - ➔ Host board game or table-top role-playing game (RPG) nights
 - ➔ Organize sports for fun: basketball, soccer, volleyball, badminton, bouldering, running, etc.
 - ➔ Have teens cook and host a meal for friends
 - ➔ Organize a hike or orienteering activity
 - ➔ Play music together
 - ➔ Gather for dog-walking afternoons
 - ➔ Host creative writing, calligraphy, craft evenings
 - ➔ Teens can meet at local cafes for book club meetings
 - ➔ etc.

This list could go on; you get the idea. These are not outlandish suggestions. We have hosted or organized all of the examples mentioned over the years, and they were phone-free, high-quality, engaging real-life activities. And never having owned a cell-phone, I can affirm that life without it (albeit inconvenient at times) is very possible.

5. MAKE IT HAPPEN

For the period of the digital fast, write down (preferably on paper) what worked for you and what made you slip.

During your ‘digital fast’ month make it your goal (in no particular order) to:

1. Create one beautiful thing
2. Read one book
3. Go for one two-hour walk
4. Visit one family member you have not seen in a while
5. Meet with one friend for a face-to-face conversation
6. Reach out to one neighbor
7. Cook one new meal
8. Engage in one new physical activity
9. Do one thing to make your home more beautiful
10. Leave your phone at home for one outing

At the end of the fast, we will invite readers to share their experiences and will compile an essay of “cognitive liberity” and “anachronistic” practices that worked, the books that were read, the meals that were cooked, and the beautiful things that were created.