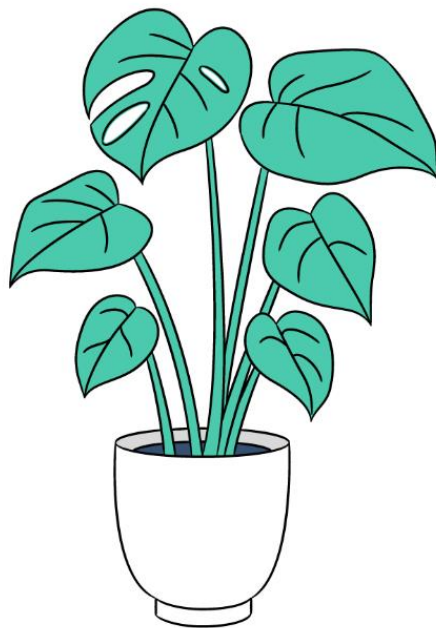# A GUIDE FOR HEALTHY SCREEN TIME HABITS

Created by Julie Molina, NBC-HWC

Welcome

If you are ready to better your digital screen time habits, this guide is for you.

You'll learn more about:

➜ The problems with spending too much time on screens.
➜ Why limiting screen time is difficult.
➜ Why behavior change strategies can help.

You'll also have the opportunity to workshop your habits using the included *Screen Time Habits Workbook (page 10).*

For now, let's jump right to setting yourself up for success…

🍃 *ACTION STEP: While exploring this guide, you're invited to take a break from any digital distractions.*

Turn off notifications, disconnect from data or WIFI, or print out a copy of this guide. If you are not able to finish the guide in one sitting, you may return at any time to complete or review the sections. Be sure to have something available to make notes on the document or somewhere else.

Once you decide how you'd like to limit your digital distractions and engage with this guide, read on.

Keep in mind: this guide is a resource for older teens to adults. Children and younger adolescents will have their own unique considerations and recommendations.

That being said, living out the same practices you might also be trying to teach others is a very powerful thing to do. By committing to build better boundaries for yourself (just as you did with that first action step), you can shape your life in a way that boosts wellbeing on many levels.

The problems with spending too much time on screens

Engaging with digital devices is not a good or bad thing in itself. However, there are problems that too much screen time use can cause.

🍃 *ACTION STEP: As you read through the section, think about which problems you've noticed in your own life from too much screen time.*

Screens pull your senses and attention away from other things. Many digital devices encourage you to be sedentary while you engage with them. They also make your body go through specific, repetitive motions. This can be taxing on our ***physical*** bodies, especially over time.
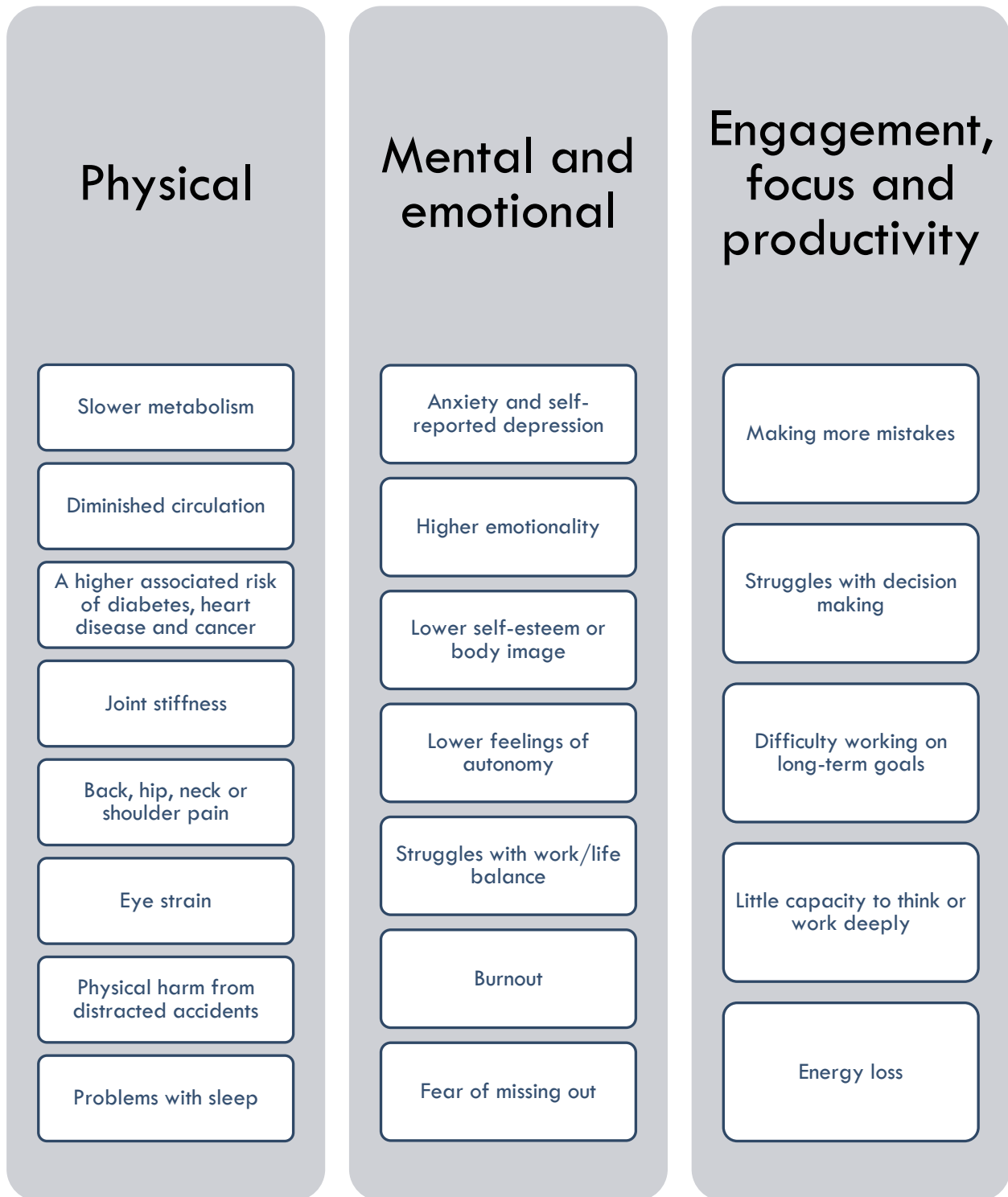
Your ***mental and emotional*** wellbeing can suffer too, from the physical tolls and psychological effects.

Finally, our digital environments are usually set up in a way that encourages multitasking. Every task we do requires a certain amount of brainpower and focus, of which no human has a limitless supply. Splitting your brainpower across too many tasks at once leads to problems with ***engagement, focus and productivity.***

These are just a few common reasons why managing the time you spend with screens is an important step you can take for your health and wellbeing. Others likely come to your mind as well. Regardless, having good reasons to maintain better screen time boundaries does not mean it's an easy thing to do.

Figure 1: Problems linked with too much screen time

Physical	Mental and emotional	Engagement, focus and productivity
Slower metabolism	Anxiety and self-reported depression	Making more mistakes
Diminished circulation	Higher emotionality	Struggles with decision making
A higher associated risk of diabetes, heart disease and cancer	Lower self-esteem or body image	Difficulty working on long-term goals
Joint stiffness	Lower feelings of autonomy	Little capacity to think or work deeply
Back, hip, neck or shoulder pain	Struggles with work/life balance	Energy loss
Eye strain	Burnout	
Physical harm from distracted accidents	Fear of missing out	
Problems with sleep		

Why limiting screen time is difficult

If you have never made conscious changes to your digital habits before, you're not alone. According to a survey from Google (n.d.), only one in four people have attempted changes to their technology use to gain a greater sense of digital wellbeing. And there are good reasons for why this may be.

⊕ Using technology contributes to people's sense of wellbeing

The reality is, there is value in using digital technology. Imagine being asked to completely disconnect from every digital device you own. What are all the good things you'd lose? What about all the important things? Though everyone's definition of positive screen time activities varies depending on their unique perceptions and context, in all likelihood there would be reasons such a change would decrease your wellbeing.

🧠 Your brain gets hooked

Much of what we experience digitally also happens to catch special attention from our brains. This includes things like intermittent rewards, cues for dopamine, serotonin and other pleasure inducing hormones. These neurological patterns get reinforced with time and repetition. Your brain starts to associate time spent on the screen with certain rewards, making it all the more likely you will experience urges to continue use.

🏠 Deep integration in our environments

Whether it's for personal use, work or school, technology plays a role in most situations these days. It tends to be the most efficient means to achieve the outcomes you desire.

Even when we aren't actively using our screens for something, their simple presence still cues us. One example of this was a study that found face down, silenced smartphones negatively affected the performance of participants on cognitive tests when compared to participants whose phone was moved to another room (Ward et al., 2017). You see your phone or feel it in your pocket, unconsciously you are reminded of the messages that might be coming in or the apps to check. It takes away a portion of your brainpower from the task at hand.

📈 Small actions add up

The first thing this guide asked you to do was to take a break from extra digital distractions for a moment. A small decision like that may not seem like much, but it's also what James Clear, an expert on habits, calls a decisive moment – a little choice at a key moment that delivers an outsized impact (Clear, 2018).

You run into many decisive moments in a given day that add to how much time you spend on screens. One or two small choices may not seem like much, yet they may have rippling effects on the actions that follow. Figure 2 shows a decisive moment flow chart of how this effect might look as someone's morning unfolds.
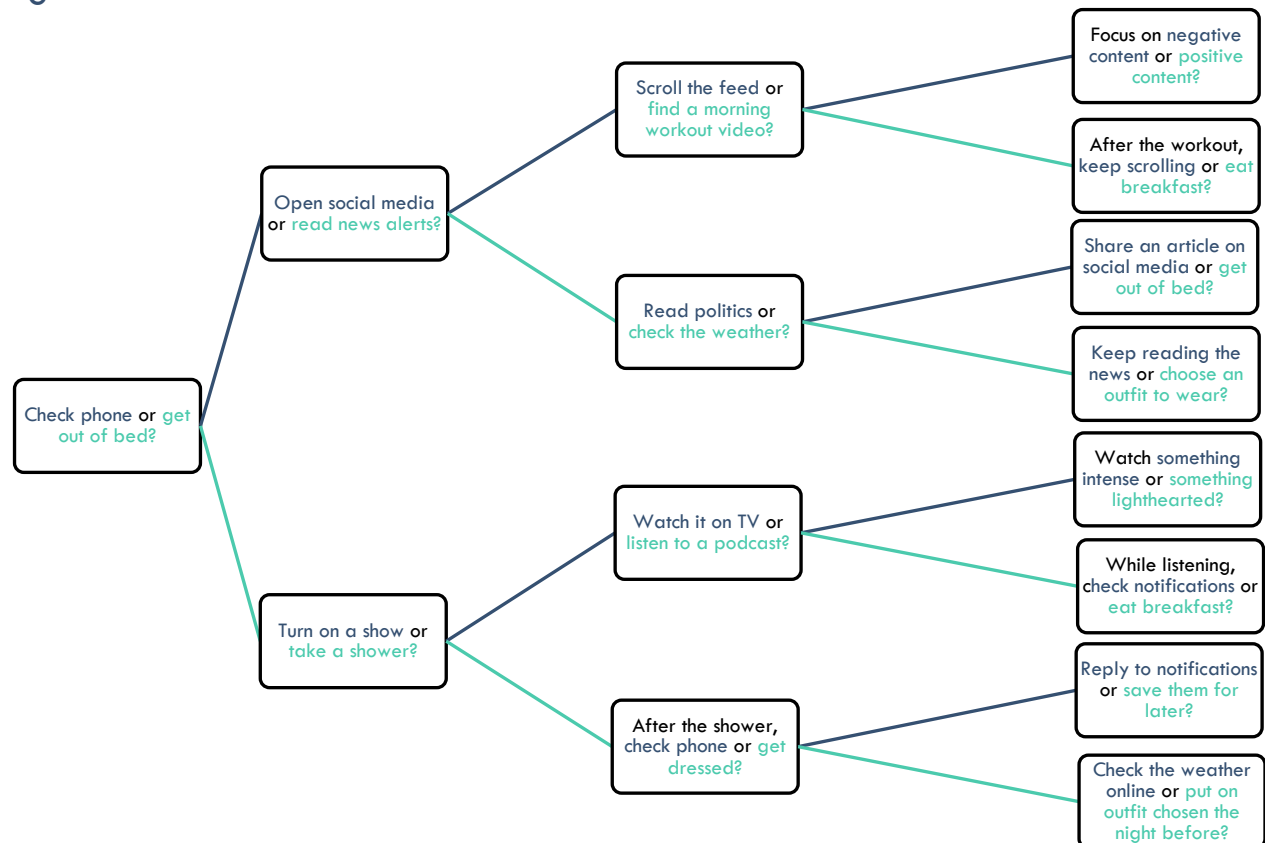
🌿 *ACTION STEP: Can you decide which decisive moments lead to more screen time? How about the ones that involved technology but likely contributed in a positive way to this person's day?*

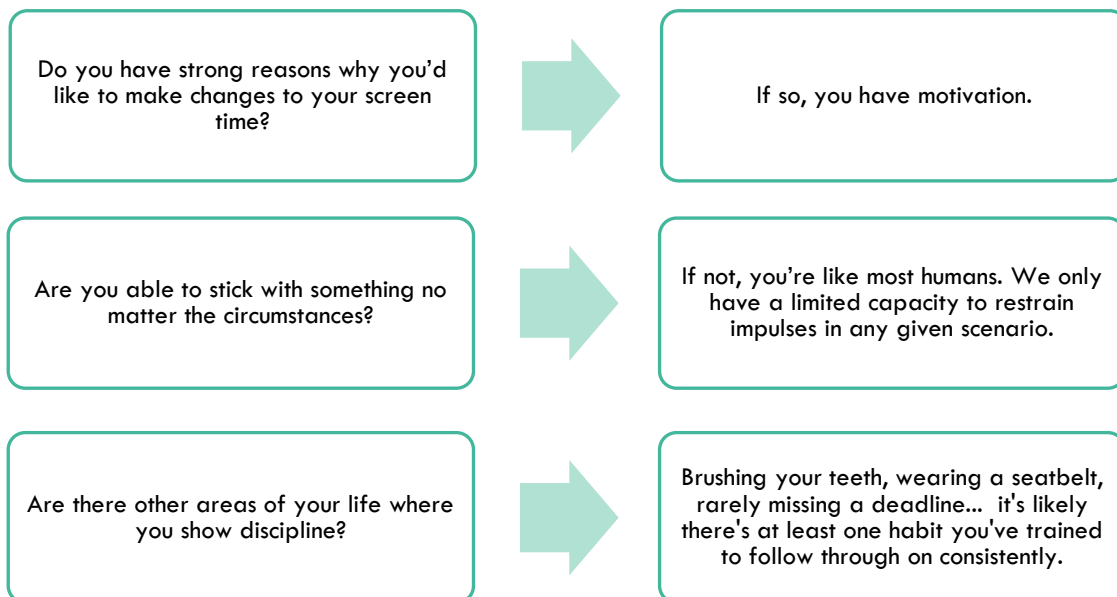## Figure 2: Decisive moment flow chart

🍃 *ACTION STEP: Reflect on own experience. What has made enforcing good screen time boundaries difficult?*

In summary: There's a lot more to it than willpower.

If you've ever caught yourself thinking that you're too unmotivated, lacking in willpower or discipline to make the changes you'd like for your screen time use, challenge those thoughts:

Do you have strong reasons why you'd like to make changes to your screen time?	→ If so, you have motivation.
Are you able to stick with something no matter the circumstances?	→ If not, you're like most humans. We only have a limited capacity to restrain impulses in any given scenario.
Are there other areas of your life where you show discipline?	→ Brushing your teeth, wearing a seatbelt, rarely missing a deadline... it's likely there's at least one habit you've trained to follow through on consistently.

Just as you've learned certain behaviors in the past, it's possible for you to learn new ones. It's also possible to unlearn behaviors that you'd like to let go of. This is where the use of behavior change can help.

Why behavior change strategies can help

Professionals use behavior change techniques to support individuals attempting all sorts of health-related changes, including quitting smoking, reducing alcohol intake, eating better and exercising more. Instead of relying on fleeting forces for change (such as the ebbs and flows of willpower or motivation), behavior change focuses on getting to the deeper roots and systems behind the habits.

It shifts the focus from the action itself to the processes behind it. For example:

— "I just need to stop spending so much time on my phone." (Action only.)

— "I need to understand how my extra phone use gets triggered and why it's important to me that I change this habit. I can then design a plan to make the changes happen." (Deeper focus on the processes.)

It isn't necessary to understand all the different theories and frameworks related to behavior change in order to start making changes in your own life. However, there are some concepts that will help prepare you for the workbook section of this guide.

A focus on long-term habit upkeep

You may have heard that it takes 21 days to create a habit that sticks. In reality, there is no set timeframe.

The habits you adopt depend on different factors, including:

— **Complexity,** how easy a habit is.

— **Appeal,** how attractive or satisfying a habit is.

— **Exposure,** how frequently it is possible to practice a habit.

You can see how because of these factors, forming and maintaining a habit is going to look widely different depending on someone's specific circumstances:
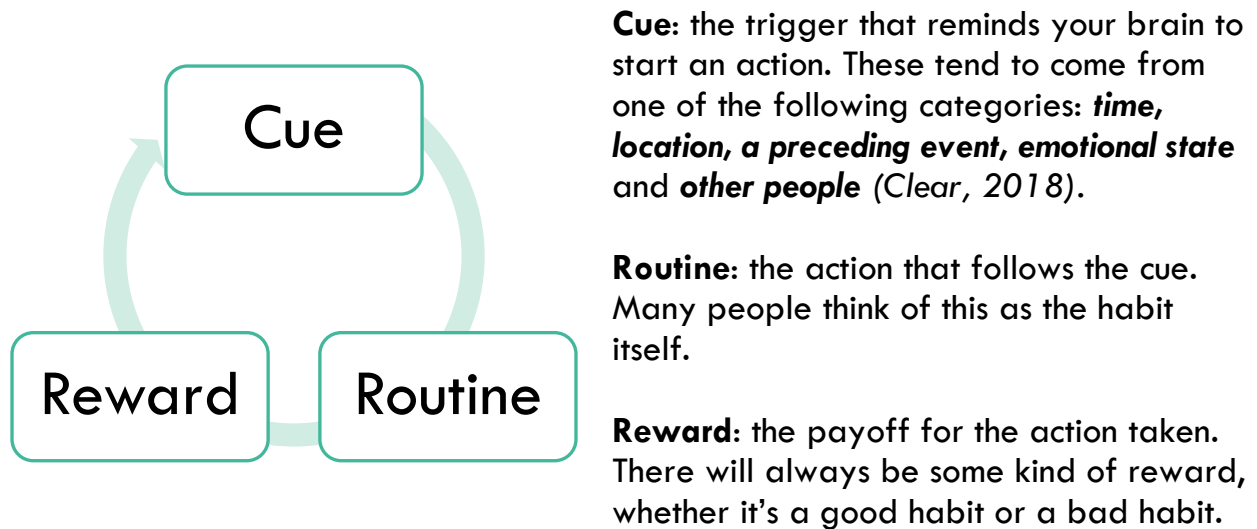
— Trying to leave your phone in another room while you sleep isn't simple when you live in a studio apartment. *(Complexity.)*

— If you don't enjoy video games, you probably won't play them in the first place. *(Appeal.)*

— A person who has many apps notifying them has more opportunities to be lured to their phone than someone who has most notifications turned off. *(Exposure.)*

Habits themselves need regular tending. Maintaining a habit for 21 days means little in the long-run if a month later you quit the habit. This doesn't mean that a small pause or slip signifies the end of a habit. Maybe you decide to stay up late one evening on the internet and you don't get enough sleep as a result. One night is not a big deal as long as most nights you do get enough sleep.

Rather than framing the process around the total time it takes to master a habit, it's often more helpful to break it down into its core components. One example of this is "the habit loop" (Duhigg, 2012).

Figure 3: The Habit Loop

Cue: the trigger that reminds your brain to start an action. These tend to come from one of the following categories: *time, location, a preceding event, emotional state* and *other people* (Clear, 2018).

Routine: the action that follows the cue. Many people think of this as the habit itself.

Reward: the payoff for the action taken. There will always be some kind of reward, whether it's a good habit or a bad habit.

The process is viewed as a loop because a habit builds with time and repetition. Every time you experience a reward from a particular routine, it reinforces your brain to repeat the routine when you encounter its cue again.

Here are some examples of how habit loops can look in the context of screen time use:

Cue	Routine	Reward
While eating breakfast (*time*)	Read email	Get tasks done and feel productive
Sitting on the couch (*location*)	Turn on the TV	Provides entertainment
Phone sends a notification (*preceding event*)	Look at the notification	Feeds curiosity and calms fears of missing out
Feeling stressed (*emotional state*)	Play online games	Participate in something fun and distracting
A friend wants to show you something on social media (*other people*)	Browse through the content with the friend	Creates a shared experience and builds connection

Even for the habits that you'd consider to be problematic ones, you can see how they serve some kind of positive purpose for the person in the example scenarios. No habit appears out of thin air. The good news: that also means you can use a habit loop to your advantage, creating or stopping habits of your choosing.

🌿 *ACTION STEP: Think about one problematic screen time habit you'd like to change. What cues the habit? What are the habit's rewards?*

A process of design thinking

Habit strategies that work for one person may not work for another. This is where the process of design thinking comes in.

At its core, design is there to creatively solve problems for present challenges. Designers of all sorts (including those that create the experiences you enjoy on your screens) engage in a particular process when they go about their work. Design thinking describes that feedback cycle creators follow to make sure that the thing they are making ticks as many of the user's needs as possible (Miller, 2017). You can see how a version of this process looks in Figure 4.

Figure 4: The design thinking process
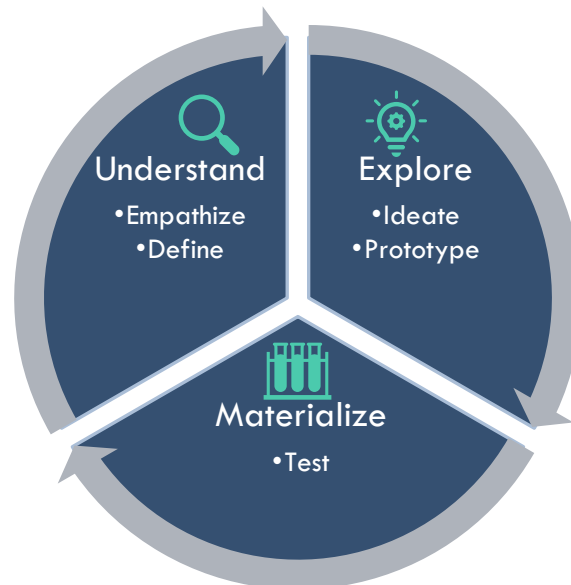
🔍 Understand

— Empathize with the user's wants and needs.
— Define the problem.

💡 Explore

— Generate ideas.
— Create early versions of those ideas.

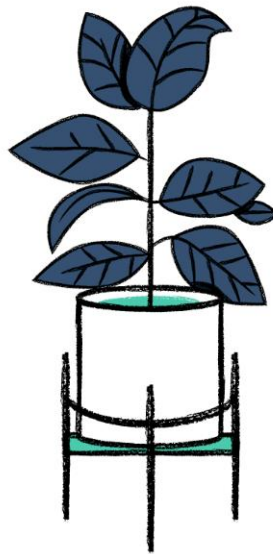## 🧪 Materialize

— Refine through testing and experiments.

As you progress through the workbook portion of this guide, you'll be using this process to tailor your own screen time habits to so they're directly in line with your life and needs. Approaching your changes with design thinking allows you to let go of the pressure that your first idea must be the best idea and makes space for learning (Moore et al., 2016). It's through this process of constant information gathering, testing and redesign you can create habits that stick no matter what life may throw your way.

🍃 *ACTION STEP: You are now ready to move on to the workbook section of this guide. You may break up each exercise as need be, or complete them all in one sitting.*

SCREEN TIME HABITS WORKBOOK

➔ Exercise A: Your motivation
➔ Exercise B: Your current habits
➔ Exercise C: Create a habit change prototype
➔ Exercise D: Supporting environment
➔ Exercise E: Track as you test

🔍 Phase 1: Understand where you're starting

Exercise A: Your motivation

Motivation is a key part of starting and sustaining any behavior change. You may not always be aware of every motivating force driving you toward a certain habit or routine. However, if you want to create the right kinds of habits, ones that align with all you value most, it helps to give your motivation some intentional thought. Otherwise, you run the risk of trying to set habits that will be more difficult for you to sustain.

🌿 *ACTION STEP: Using Figure 5 or as separate note, write your reasons for desiring to maintain good screen time boundaries. Be as specific as possible. The different categories in the table offer some general ideas of areas to consider, but it isn't necessary to fill every category if it doesn't apply to you.*

Tip: Write your motivations from the perspective of what you'd like to gain. For example, instead of, "Be less sedentary," you could write, "Be more active," or "Feel more energized."

Figure 5: Motivation table

	Motivating reasons
Physical health	
Mental and emotional health	
Focus and productivity	
Connections with others	
Your values	
Other	

🍃 *ACTION STEP: Reflect on all you wrote for this activity. Try to summarize it into one sentence using the following prompt:*

Because I am the type of person who values _____**, I will focus on my screen time habits.**

You now have a statement that links the big things motivating you toward the changes you plan to make. Save or remember your statement for the future. Having a clear big picture vision can help when you feel stuck or ready to quit.

Exercise B: Your current habits

In this exercise inspired by James Clear's "Habits Scorecard" (2018), you'll create awareness around what your baseline screen time use looks like today. Think of it like going to the doctor for a checkup. It's not possible for your doctor to recommend things until they get a better picture by checking vitals, seeing your charts and asking you questions. Putting together a picture of what your screen time use actually looks like will be helpful in the same way.

🍃 *ACTION STEP: Use* Figure 6: Screen time evaluation template *and follow the* Instructions *to make an assessment of your current screen time habits.*

Figure 6: Screen time evaluation template

Screen time services	Devices	Positive (+), negative (-), neutral (=)

Instructions

1. List all screen time services.

- Think of every service you interact with on a typical week that contributes to your total screen time. This may include specific apps, software, video or VR games, streaming services, television services and so on. Include personal, work and school products. List them all in the "Screen time services" column.

  Tip: Check your smartphone settings. Often there are built-in tools available that provide reports on your screen time use and which apps contribute.

  Example: text messaging, Google Maps, Microsoft Word, YouTube, Minecraft, cable TV

2. List all devices.

- For each service you listed, think about every device you use to access that service. This can include a smartphone, computer, tablet, video game console, television and so on. In the "Devices" column, note the relevant devices for each service.

  Example:
  Screen time service   Device(s)
  YouTube   Phone, laptop

3. Assign a rating for each service.

- In the "Positive (+), negative (-), neutral (=)" column, assign a rating for each service you listed.

  Tip: To determine these ratings ask yourself, "Does the way I typically use this service help me become the type of person I wish to be?" Yes will be positive, no will be negative, and neutral does not add specific value either way. It's okay to put multiple ratings for the same service if you feel it's applicable.

  Example:
  Screen time service   Device(s)   Positive (+), negative (-), neutral (=)
  YouTube   Phone, laptop   +, -

4. See what stands out for you.

- Try to get curious and not judge what you wrote down. Notice any trends, positive and negative. What services or devices seem to contribute the most value? How about the least?

Save the screen time evaluation you created for reference. It's your map of where your screen time use is going and how valuable that time spent is to you.

Phase 2: Explore

Exercise C: Create a habit change prototype

Now that you have a better understanding of the different services adding to your total screen time, the quality of those interactions and your motivations for change, you have plenty of supporting information to brainstorm the changes you'd like to make.

🌿 *ACTION STEP: Brainstorm a list of changes to your screen time you'd like to start out with.*

Be as specific as possible and use your screen time evaluation to help you decide. Focus less on the outcome (I'd like to reduce my total screen time use by one hour each day) and more on the specific action or routine that will help you to achieve that outcome (I'd like to stop scrolling social media during my hour-long lunch break). Save your brainstorm to refer to in the future. You may use the table in Figure 7 if you wish.

Tip: Don't worry too much about which specific changes you choose first. What is most important is getting the process started and having some ideas on hand.

Figure 7: Screen time changes brainstorm

-
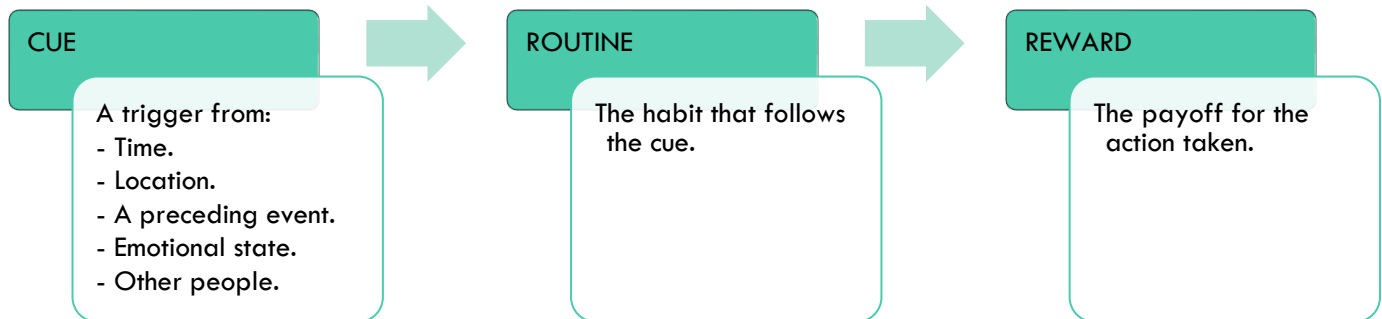-
-
-
-

🌿 *ACTION STEP: From the list you created, choose one change to focus on.*

It's important to only focus on one change at a time. Sticking to this practice allows you to more easily stay motivated, avoid overwhelm and notice the successes when they come through.

Recall that habits tend to follow a formula:

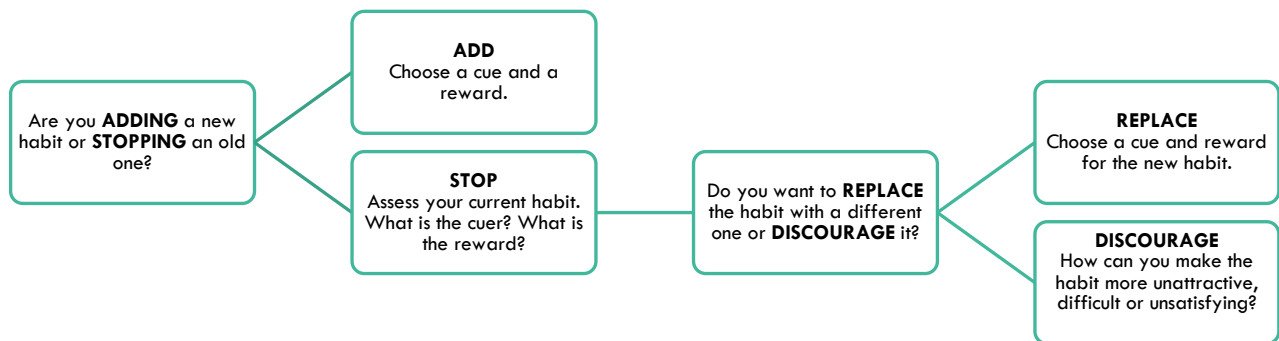| CUE	ROUTINE	REWARD
A trigger from: - Time. - Location. - A preceding event. - Emotional state. - Other people.	The habit that follows the cue.	The payoff for the action taken.

You'll be using this formula to create your routine prototype.

Tip: When designing a habit, you may need to choose a reward completely unrelated to the action. This is especially helpful when the new routine feels very unmotivating. For example, say you want to stop watching so much TV at night but you love the shows you watch. To help motivate yourself, you decide you will splurge to go see a movie you've wanted to see in theaters if you can keep your TV watching to one hour per night for a week.

🍃 *ACTION STEP: Use this habit change flow chart to develop your idea.*

Figure 8: The habit change flow chart

Flow chart:
- Are you **ADDING** a new habit or **STOPPING** an old one?
  - **ADD** — Choose a cue and a reward.
  - **STOP** — Assess your current habit. What is the cuer? What is the reward?
    - Do you want to **REPLACE** the habit with a different one or **DISCOURAGE** it?
      - **REPLACE** — Choose a cue and reward for the new habit.
      - **DISCOURAGE** — How can you make the habit more unattractive, difficult or unsatisfying?
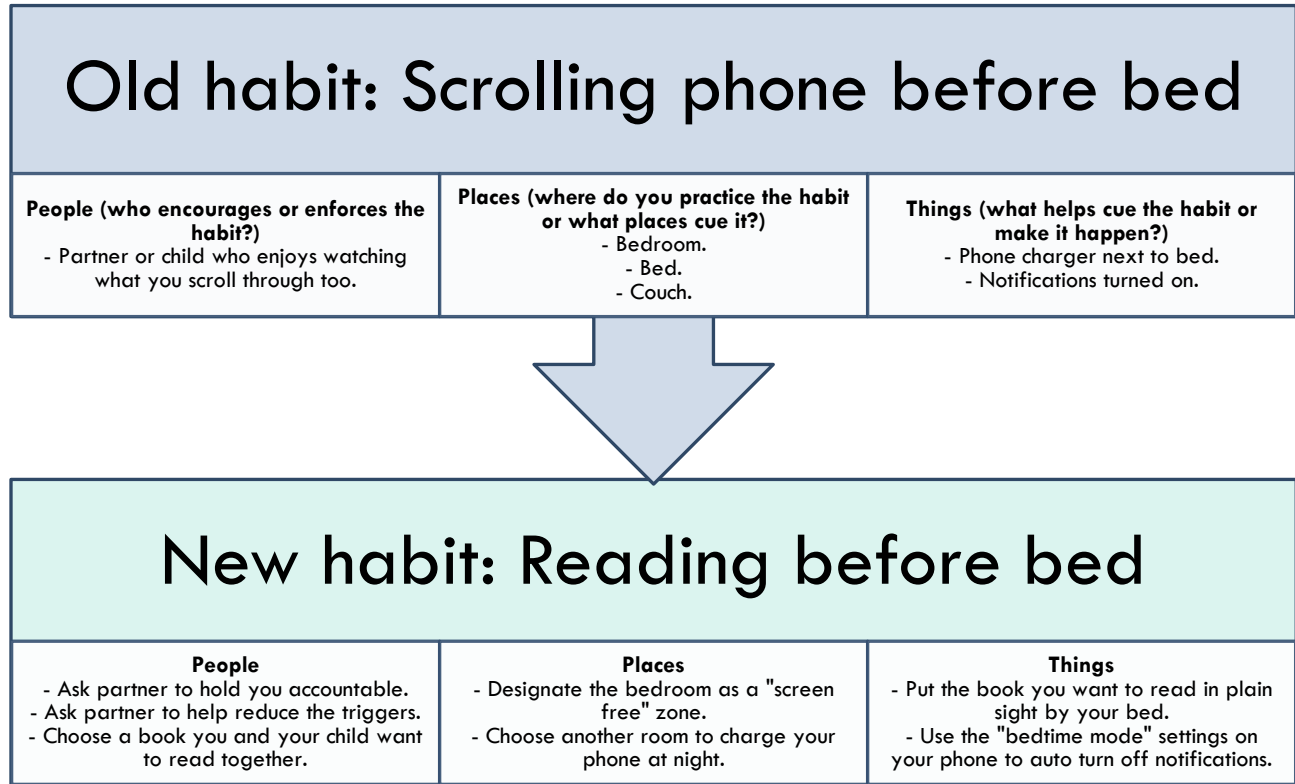
What did you come up with? Be sure to write it down or save it for yourself. Include any cues, rewards or other details you thought of that'd support your change.

Exercise D: Supporting environment

Now that you have a change to focus on, you will want to set up your environment so that it helps you to stick with it. Your environment includes the people, places and things that influence your habit's success (Moore et al., 2016).

As an example, let's say your goal is to replace scrolling on your phone before bed with reading a book. See Figure 9 for potential environmental factors involved in the old habit, and how you could tweak the environment to make reading before bed the easier and more appealing choice.

Figure 9: Example scenario to replace scrolling phone before bed with reading

Old habit: Scrolling phone before bed		
People (who encourages or enforces the habit?) - Partner or child who enjoys watching what you scroll through too.	**Places (where do you practice the habit or what places cue it?)** - Bedroom. - Bed. - Couch.	**Things (what helps cue the habit or make it happen?)** - Phone charger next to bed. - Notifications turned on.

New habit: Reading before bed		
People - Ask partner to hold you accountable. - Ask partner to help reduce the triggers. - Choose a book you and your child want to read together.	**Places** - Designate the bedroom as a "screen free" zone. - Choose another room to charge your phone at night.	**Things** - Put the book you want to read in plain sight by your bed. - Use the "bedtime mode" settings on your phone to auto turn off notifications.

No matter what habit you are focusing on, you want to do all you can to make the choices you want to make the easy and appealing choices. This will help on those days when your willpower is feeling lower than usual.

🍃 *ACTION STEP: Consider any people, places and things involved in the habit change you are focusing on. What tweaks might you make to support yourself? If you can make your cue(s) an active part of the environment, this is most ideal.*

🧪 Phase 3: Materialize

Exercise E: Track as you test

You are now well-prepared to try out your new screen time habits. Keep in mind: your first ideas may not look perfect, and that's okay. Part of the process is to keep testing things out and making tweaks until you have routines that work well for you.

This is where creating a system to track and self-evaluate your new habits can really pay off. Imagine a scientist who tried to run all their experiments from memory alone. You can see how easy it'd be for them to lose track of the details, miss important patterns or otherwise lose out along the way. Tracking provides you with a means to objectively measure your progress with your changes over time. It can also support your motivation to see your small successes along the way, especially when a new routine may still be feeling challenging (Moore et al., 2016).

🍃 *ACTION STEP: Determine what you'd like to measure.*

Consider that there may be multiple outcomes that'd be useful for you to measure beyond minutes per day of screen time. Think back to some of your motivations for change as inspiration. Maybe you'd also be interested in paying attention to things like:

— Effects on sleep.
— Effects on mood.
— How productive you were during the day.

Take your time deciding what information to track will be most important for you, as having meaningful measures can really make a difference.

✔ *Reminder: keep your digital break going – you're doing great!*

🌿 *ACTION STEP: Decide on what you'd like to use as your habit tracker, or create your own.*

Now that you know everything you'll be measuring, you need to decide how you're going to track and measure it. Some ideas are:

— A journal.
— A calendar or daily planner.
— An app or software.
— Using the screen time data tools built in your device.

On the other hand, you may find that it makes most sense for you to design a habits tracker of your own. Here is a simple template for inspiration or use:

Figure 10: Habit tracker template

Habit:

Date / Time	Was it successful? (Yes or no)	Details noticed

Remember: the easier and more appealing something is, the more likely you will follow through on that habit. Tracking is a sort of habit itself. The more you lean on tools that work well for you already or that feel motivating, the more likely you'll stick to it. By dedicating time to bring awareness to and track your habits, you increase the chances that you'll commit to the process, even if the first results are not what you expected.

🎈 FINAL STEP: Take a moment to celebrate!

That was a lot of work you just dedicated to your digital wellbeing. Whether you found new tools, new understandings or something else, be sure to acknowledge the time and focus you put toward this task. While your habits will be a continual practice of upkeep and refinement, hopefully you feel even more prepared to create and maintain healthy screen time boundaries in your life.

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