

The Unplugging Guide

Social media platforms are built by teams of engineers and psychologists whose job is to keep you engaged for as long as possible. That's not a conspiracy — that's the business model. This guide explains the mechanics, then gives you the settings, tools, and habits to take back your attention.

The Facts

3.5 Hours

Average daily social media use among US teens.

100+

Average phone pickups per day — about every 10 min.

20 Minutes

Time needed to refocus after one phone distraction.



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The Mechanics

Why It's Hard To Stop

Autoplay & Infinite Scroll

Removes every natural stopping point. The moment you'd normally decide to put the phone down never arrives.

Variable Reward

The feed is like a box of chocolate. Unpredictable rewards are far more addictive than predictable ones — same mechanism as slot machines.

Social Pressure

Streaks, reply pressure, unread counts. These manufacture a sense of urgency and consequence for logging off.

Red Notification Badges

The color red triggers an alert response in the brain. Badges are designed to create urgency — not inform you.

Hyper-Personalization

Algorithms learn exactly what keeps you watching. The feed gets more accurate the more you use it — which creates the trap.

Frictionless Access

Apps are designed to open instantly with zero effort. Adding even one moment of friction, a moment of pause, breaks the reflex loop.

Pushing Back On Instagram

Features To Reclaim Attention

Feed Mode → Following

Shows only people you chose to follow, chronologically.

Removes algorithmic suggestions entirely.

Tap Instagram logo → Following

Sleep Mode

Pauses all notifications during hours you set. Auto-replies to DMs so there's no social pressure.

Settings → Notifications → Sleep Mode

Time Spent

Weekly breakdown by day. Set a daily reminder and a soft time limit.

Settings → Your Activity → Time Management

Snooze Suggested Posts

Hides all suggested (non-followed) posts for 30 days at a time.

Settings → Content Preferences

Your Algorithm

Add/Remove the AI-determined preferences that power the algorithm

Settings → Content Preferences

⚡ **30-second win:** Tap the Instagram wordmark at the top of your feed and switch to "Following." Notice how different it feels immediately.



Pushing Back On TikTok

Features To Reclaim Attention

Refresh For You Feed

Resets all algorithmic inferences. Clears the profile TikTok built on you.

Settings → Content Preferences → Refresh Your For You Feed

Screen Time

Weekly breakdown by day. Set a daily reminder, a soft time limit, and periodic screen time breaks.

Settings → Your Activity → Time Management

STEM Feed

Replaces the For You algorithm with a topic-based science and technology feed.

Settings → Content Preferences

Manage Topics

Use slides to express content preferences for certain topics

Settings → Content Preferences → Manage Topics

Disable Off-TikTok Activity

Stops TikTok from using your behavior on other apps to personalize ads.

Settings → Ads

⚡ **30-second win:** Turn on screen time breaks to get periodic reminders to log off. Adding a single extra decision point helps break a doomscroll.



Pushing Back On Snapchat

Features To Reclaim Attention

Autoplay

Audience-Based, Activity-Based, and Third-Party Network.
Disabling all three reduces the data used to target you with ads.
Settings → Ad Preferences

Inferred Interests

See and toggle what Snapchat thinks you care about.
Correct it to reflect your actual interests.
Settings → Lifestyle & Interests

Notifications

Snapchat has a lot of non-chat notifications. Customize to only receive substantive notifications.
Settings → Notifications

State Privacy Choices

California and Florida law provides additional tools that restrict the personal data used for targeted advertising.
Settings → (State) Privacy Choices

⚡ **30-second win:** Go to Lifestyle & Interests and change your listed interests to things you actually want to learn about, not just what you've been watching.



Pushing Back On YouTube

Features To Reclaim Attention

Autoplay

The single most impactful YouTube setting. Without autoplay, every video requires a deliberate choice to keep watching.
Settings → Playback

Periodic Break Reminder

YouTube prompts you to stop at any interval you choose. Pairs well with a specific watch goal before you open the app.
Settings → General → Remind Me To Take A Break

Shorts Feed Limit

Set a daily limit for viewing Shorts. Provides a notification when the limit has been reached
Settings → General → Shorts Feed Limit

Bedtime Reminder

Adds a notification during your chosen bedtime hours to discourage late-night viewing.
Settings → General → Remind Me When It's Bedtime

Refresh History

Periodically delete YouTube history to reduce feed personalization. Can be automated to occur regularly
Settings → Manage All History

⚡ **30-second win:** The autoplay feature can also be toggled while watching. Tap the autoplay toggle in the top right portion of the video player. That one switch changes the entire experience.



Screen Time

Apps

Apps To Help In Your Journey

BePresent

Gamifies the logging off experience. Set your goal, block distracting apps, and gain experience points to climb the leaderboard. You can also add a friend as an accountability buddy.

ScreenZen

Adds an additional barrier to distracting apps. Pick your apps, a daily limit of opens, and the duration of each open. Then choose an activity, like math problems, breathing, or step goals, that must be done before access is granted.

ClearSpace

Uses exercises as the primary intervention. Pick your apps and set your goals. Then choose your intervention. Some options include push-ups, sit-ups, jump rope, and mindful breathing.

Opal

Holistically evaluates your screen time habits. Set your own rules and let the app take care of the rest. Provides real-time nudges when it detects mindless scrolling habits.

SocialLite

Provides a modified web-version of major social media platforms with addictive features removed. Get Instagram or YouTube with short-form feeds removed. More modified platforms are available in beta.

⚡ **Some Advice:** Screen time apps can play a critical role in taking on your screen time. Sometimes, however, they work best as a “enforcer” to the healthier habits you are trying to build. Consider using one of these apps with our habit recommendations found later in the guide.



Device-Level Settings

Screen Time / Digital Wellbeing

See exactly how long you spent in each app. Set per-app time limits and schedule Downtime windows where only approved apps work. Set a passcode and ask someone else to hold it.

iOS: Settings → Screen Time

Android: Settings → Digital Wellbeing

Disable Badges

Red notification badges use color deliberately to signal urgency. Disabling them is one of the lowest-effort, highest-impact changes you can make. Most people notice a difference within a day.

iOS: Settings → Notifications → [App] → Badges

Android: Settings → Notifications → Advanced → App Icon Badges

Focus/Do Not Disturb

Create a custom Focus mode that silences everything except calls from contacts. Schedule it automatically — overnight, during homework, at dinner. iOS also lets you hide distracting app icons while active.

iOS: Settings → Focus

Android: Settings → Modes & Routines

Grayscale

Removes the color cues that make apps visually rewarding. Many people find scrolling significantly less compelling in grayscale. Takes 30 seconds — try it for one day and see if you notice a difference.

iPhone: Settings → Accessibility → Display → Color Filters

Android: Settings → Accessibility → Color Correction



Build Better Habits

What Makes The Difference

ON YOUR OWN

- **Phone-Free Mornings**

Don't check your phone for the first 30 minutes of the day. Use a physical alarm clock. Starting the day without the phone changes your baseline mood measurably.

- **Charge Outside The Bedroom**

Overnight charging in another room eliminates late-night scrolling entirely. Also helps with motivation to get out of bed in the morning.

- **Batch Checking**

Pick 2–3 set times to check social apps instead of continuously. Set a timer. The apps will still be there.

- **Hide The Apps**

Put distracting apps in a folder, on a different page, or delete them and only use web versions. One extra bit of friction is surprisingly effective at breaking the reflex open.

- **Barrier Apps**

Add a mandatory breath, a question, or other activity before any chosen app opens. Often that's enough to decide you don't actually want to open it.

WITH OTHERS

- **Phone Stack At Meals**

Everyone puts their phone face-down in the center of the table. First to grab theirs pays the bill or makes the next snack run. Becomes a group norm fast.

- **Accountability Partner**

Text one person your daily screen time every morning. Knowing someone will see it changes behavior — not through shame, but through awareness.

- **24-Hour App Challenge**

Agree with friends to go one day without a chosen app. Share your experience afterward. Just be honest.

- **Join Something Phone-Free**

A sport, an art class, a volunteer shift: these are places to be where phones don't really belong.

- **One Evening Offline**

One evening a week, the group agrees to be reachable only by call. Even 3 hours counts. It gets easier every week.

Community Picks

Real Responses From Young People

We asked young people what their favorite unplugging tools/activities are. The following is a collection of those responses.

"Reducing Animations, Using Grayscale, Removing Social Apps from Home screen, Setting black wallpaper. That is my way to reduce social media addiction and screen time in general"

"Making plans with friends and family (or myself) that don't involve screens (board games, walk, gym, etc.) and scheduling them in my calendar!"

"Deleting all social media apps to be honest and only focusing on a to do list"

"I think my favorite way to unplug is reading a good book, especially when the story captivates me! I just finished a novel I really enjoyed."

"My phone charger isn't in my bedroom, so i have to spend time before bed and in the morning offline!"

"I find that if I can stay off my phone for the first hour of my day, it makes it easier to remain offline the rest of the day"

"For me exercise is a big one!"

"Simply leaving my room. Many of my habits are encouraged by just sitting around in my room all day. Going outside definitely changes the perspective."



Additional Resources To Dive Deeper

- **Logoffmovement.org**

The LOG OFF Movement (Creators of this Guide). A youth-led organization helping young people build healthier relationships with social media, AI, and other digital platforms through community, education, and campaigns.

- **Humanetech.com**

The Center for Humane Technology. Offers free toolkits, a podcast, and school curriculum. They are the organization behind The Social Dilemma.

- **Commonsensemedia.org**

Provides reviews, family guides, lesson plans, and many more resources to support healthy technology use.

- **Anxiousgeneration.com**

Home of the movement around the NYT Best-Selling Book. Offers a wide-range of reviewed resources for parents, educators, young adults, and policymakers looking to implementing their “four new norms” for creating a healthier childhood.