Why 'unwinding' with screens may be making us more stressed

Pairing rest with screen use may undermine the very restoration that people are seeking. Digital media stimulate attention, emotion and sensory processing. Even while people are sitting or lying still, being onscreen can keep their nervous systems in a heightened state of arousal.

BY ROBIN PICKERING

As people increasingly report feeling overwhelmed by daily life, many are using self-care to cope. Conversations and social media feeds are saturated with the language of "me time," burnout, boundaries and nervous system regulation.

To meet this demand, the wellness industry has grown into a multitrillion-dollar global market. Myriad providers offer products, services and lifestyle prescriptions that promise calm, balance and restoration.

Paradoxically, though, even as interest in self-care continues to grow, people's mental health is getting worse. Obviously, most people cannot go 100 percent screen-free for days, much less months, but the underlying principle offers a powerful lesson for practising effective self-care.

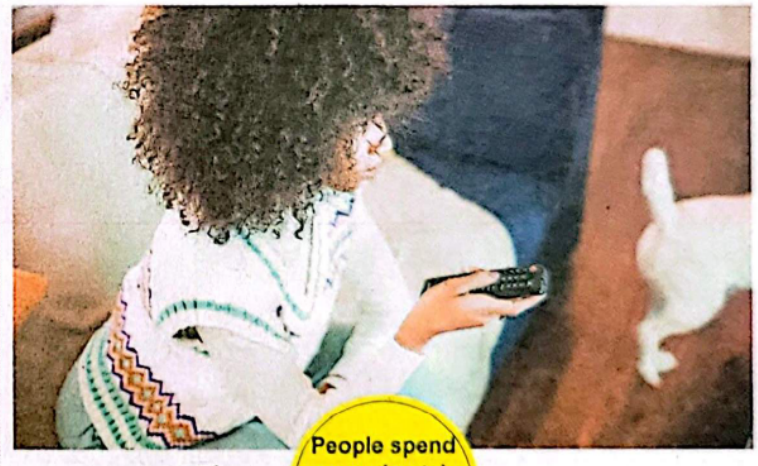
How people try to cope

Many say they actively practice self-care in everyday life. For example, they describe taking mental health days, protecting personal time, setting boundaries around work and prioritising rest and leisure. The problem lies in how they use that leisure time.

Watching television is the most popular leisure activity, with adults spending far more time watching TV than exercising, spending time with friends or practising reflection through activities such as meditation. Other common self-care activities include watching movies and gaming.

Modern leisure time increasingly includes smartphone use. Surveys suggest that mobile phones have become the dominant screen for many, with adults spending several hours per day on their phones.

For many adults, checking social media or watching short videos has become a default relaxation behaviour layered on top of traditional screen use. This practice is often referred to as second screening.



People spend approximately seven hours per day on screens.

Although many people turn to screen-based activities to wind down, these activities may have the opposite effect biologically.

Why modern screen use feels different

Pre-Internet forms of leisure often involved activities such as watching scheduled television programmes, listening to radio broadcasts or reading books and magazines. For all of these pastimes, the content followed a predictable sequence with natural stopping points.

Today's digital media environment looks very different. People routinely engage with multiple screens at once, respond to frequent notifications and switch rapidly between several streams of content. These environments continuously require users to split their attention, engage their emotions and make decisions.

This type of mental multitasking draws on the same neural systems people are often attempting to rest with leisure. The result is a far more fragmented and cognitively demanding environment than in the past. People now spend approximately six to seven hours per day on screens across multiple devices. Splitting attention between more than one screen at a time such as using the phone while watching television, is common. This juggling exposes peoples' brains to multiple streams of sensory and emotional input simultaneously.

Modern digital platforms are designed to maximise engagement. Algorithms tend to prioritise emotionally arousing content, particularly anger, anxiety and outrage. These feelings drive clicks, sharing and time spent on platforms. Research has shown that this design is associated with higher stress, distraction and cognitive load.

When 'rest' does not restore

Against the backdrop of daily hassles and competing demands, it can feel like relief to flip on the TV. Practices such as streaming or so-called bed-rotting; spending extended periods in bed while scrolling, often are framed as a form of radical rest or self-care.

Other common coping behaviours include leaving the television on as background noise, scrolling between tasks throughout the day or using phones during meals and conversations. These strategies can feel restful because they temporarily reduce external demands and decision-making. Even while people are sitting or lying still, being onscreen can keep their nervous systems in a heightened state of arousal.

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