A Survival Guide for Beating Information Addiction

Post written by [Leo Babauta](#).

Are you suffering from information addiction? It's a growing problem as people spend more and more of their time online — and while online tools are amazing, being addicted to checking them can steal most of your day.

You know you're an information addict if you:

- Check email, Facebook, news, or some other social network first thing in the morning and last thing at night.
- Are constantly on your mobile device when you're away from home/office.
- Can't get away from the computer in order to get outside, exercise, or spend time with people while disconnected.
- Are constantly posting to Facebook or Twitter or Instagram, or texting/emailing, when meeting with other people.
- Can't get important work done because you have to check your messages.
- Feel anxiety if you're completely disconnected for more than a few minutes.
- Can't imagine spending an entire day disconnected.

Now, if none of these seem like a problem for you, even if you do them, then they probably aren't a problem. But if you see yourself in one or more of these and want to change, this guide is for you.

This survival guide isn't the ultimate guide to beating an addiction, however — it's a set of tips and techniques I've used to survive the constant pull of the online world.

First Steps

Don't know where to start? These first steps can be done today.

1. Assess your habits. What are you addicted to most? When are you most likely to be sucked into your addiction? For the rest of today, and the next several days, keep a handy little piece of paper and a pen/pencil with you, and write down the things you check often, putting a tally mark next to those things each time you check them. A TV news channel? Facebook or Twitter or G+? Pinterest or Reddit? Keep a tally so you know what you're dealing with.

2. Introduce the pause. Addictions are something we often do automatically, without thinking. Start to break this chain of trigger-habit auto-response by wedging a small [pause](#) in between them. When you get the urge to check something you're addicted to, notice this urge, and pause for just one second. During this pause, simply ask yourself, "Do I really want to do this, and why?" You can then go on to do it, no matter what the answer, but the important thing is having at least the briefest pause.

3. Take a break every hour. Even if you're stuck on the sites you're addicted to all day long, take 1o minute breaks once an hour. Set up an hourly reminder on your computer, and when that reminder pops up, get away from the computer. Take a walk for 10 minutes. Stretch. Do some pushups and squats. Clean your messy house. Write in a notebook, or sketch. Talk to someone in person. Drink some water and have a fruit. Meditate. When you come back to the computer, try closing the browser for a few minutes and doing some non-Internet work before going back online.

Changing Habits

Over the long term, you can change your habits. This will take a month or two, so you'll want to **fully commit** to a change. Any change done half-assed won't last.

1. Start with your biggest trigger. Assuming you've done the assessment and introduced the pause as recommended above, you should know your most common triggers — the things that cause you to go check something. That might be things like: starting a work task (and wanting to avoid it), getting on a bus/train, waking up, eating, getting a notification on your phone or computer, being bored or stressed, thinking of something you want to look up. Whatever your triggers are, pick the one that happens most. If there are several, just pick one of those randomly.

2. Pick a replacement habit. What do you want to do instead of checking email, Facebook, Twitter or the like? Pick something positive and fun that you can do in 5 minutes every time your most common trigger happens. That might be: reading a few pages of a novel, journaling, doing pushups, taking a walk, drinking water, meditating, writing, painting, practicing a language, writing a letter with paper and pen, etc. You're going to try to do this every time the habit happens, instead of the actual habit.

3. Do the new habit after the trigger, every time. Don't allow any exceptions, or you won't form the habit. A new habit is formed much faster, and more strongly, if you do it extremely consistently after the trigger. If you're inconsistent, and still do the old habit, you are allowing the old habit to stay in place. Now, just because you miss once or twice doesn't mean you should give up — just start again and try to be more consistent, figure out why you failed, and plan to beat that obstacle. But set a rule that you'll allow no exceptions!

4. Use positive public pressure. Having accountability helps. Blogging about your new change, or posting it on Facebook or Twitter (I know, a bit ironic), can help you feel some public accountability. Tell everyone you know that you're not going to check Facebook (for example) within 15 minutes of starting an important work task. My friend Michael Ellsberg uses negative consequences (something I've done in the past as well): if he eats sugar or refined carbs, he has to make a donation to Mitt Romney's presidential campaign (not a good thing for Michael, who is not a Romney supporter). Leverage the power of social media to beat social media.

A Balanced Life

In the long run, it's good to have an idea of what life would be like if you're not controlled by an information addiction.

How will you work? What will you be like if you're not checking things all day? Some things to consider:

- **The goal isn't to eliminate all information sources** and be shut off from the online world. It's not to throw out your iPhone or laptop. These tools are incredibly useful and powerful — obviously I make my living using them, and they have changed our lives in so many positive ways. The idea is simply not to be controlled by them, and to have a balanced life that includes other activities.
- **Schedule time for non-Internet and non-media activities**. That means actually block them off on your schedule. If you want to exercise, block off some time during the week for exercise (even just 30 minutes 3 times a week). Schedule time to spend with your friend and loved ones. Schedule time for a walk in solitude.
- **Work without distractions**. Each morning, figure out the 1-3 important things you're going to get done that day. Do the first one first, before diving into email and online distractions. Shut down your browser if you can. If necessary, do the work somewhere without Internet, or unplug your router and

give the router cord to someone to hold for an hour. Turn off all notifications on your computer and mobile device. Close everything but what you need to do your task. Learn to [focus](#).

- **Schedule a limited time for your information sources**. How often do you want to check email and Facebook (or other sites)? Pick a time and schedule for using these tools in your life, and set a limit — twice a day for just 15 minutes a session, for example. This limit allows you to use these tools but also have time for other things, and it forces you to decide what's important within that limit and to use the limited time efficiently.
- **Choose your sources wisely.** Cull your information sources and tools to the most important. Sometimes we use things just because everyone else is, but they might not be really adding much to our lives. For example, I deleted my Facebook account last year, and haven't missed it. My life goes on! You might decide to delete your Instagram or Pinterest account, to save yourself from endless browsing of things that aren't really important, for example. You might decide to only read 10 really good blogs instead of 50 ones that take up your attention. Your attention matters — you should only give it to the things that make your life better.
- **Get some sleep.** A lack of rest makes us less able to focus, and more likely to deviate from a plan of any kind of self-control. It also makes us more likely to be distracted by the Internet, [according to a new study](#). Make resta priority.

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