Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE

Co-funded by the European Union

BURNOUT PREVENT

PERSONAL GUIDE

for reduction of digital stress

Version 1

09 2026

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1. Introduction

Work today is largely digital. Emails, messaging platforms, video calls, dashboards, and notifications have become the primary medium through which millions of people do their jobs, stay connected, and manage their professional lives. For many workers, digital tools are not just useful: they are the job. This connectivity enables productivity, collaboration, and flexibility that would have been unimaginable two decades ago.

It also comes at a cost that is only beginning to be taken seriously. When digital tools extend beyond working hours — when the inbox follows you to dinner, when a notification interrupts your sleep, when a weekend never fully belongs to you — the cognitive load they carry does not disappear. It accumulates. Over time, the inability to genuinely disconnect outside of work contributes to elevated stress, deteriorating well-being, and, in its most severe form, burnout. This guide is a practical response to that reality.

1.1. About this guide

This guide was developed as part of the BURNOUT PREVENT project to support employees in small and medium-sized enterprises operating in three smart specialisation (S3) sectors — Industry 4.0, Smart Health, and Sustainable Food — where the digital demands are particularly high. It equips both managers and employees with evidence-based tools for burnout prevention.

This guide specifically draws on three project deliverables:

- **D.2.1.1 — Catalogue of Digital Detox Activities:** a structured framework for designing a personal detox plan, including detox levels, time horizons, and categories of offline activity packages, grounded in scientific literature and expert knowledge.
- **D.2.1.2 — Do's and don'ts check lists for burnout syndrome prevention:** practical guidance distilled from in-depth qualitative interviews with individuals who experienced burnout and successfully recovered — seven personal accounts from seven partner countries, synthesized into lessons that anyone can apply.
- **D.2.1.3 — Transnational testing report of digital detox activities:** the results of a three-month digital detox intervention aimed at reducing burnout. The experimental intervention was carried out with employees from seven partner countries, and the report documents what detox strategies people chose, and how burnout levels actually changed, as well as participants' subjective perceptions and evaluations of their experiences with the digital detox intervention, including the perceived benefits, challenges, and feasibility of the implemented strategies.

1.2. Who this guide is for

You do not need to be in crisis to benefit from this guide. The guide is designed for two purposes: prevention — building habits that protect your well-being before strain develops into something serious — and early intervention — recognizing warning signs and taking practical steps before they escalate.

If you are reading this as a precaution, this guide will help you understand the risks and build sustainable protective habits. If you are already feeling the effects of digital overload or early burnout, it will give you a structured, evidence-informed path toward recovery.

1.3. How to use this guide

The guide is not meant to be read once and put away. It is a working document — one you can return to at different points, depending on what you need.

The content follows a logical progression: from understanding the nature of digital stress and its relationship to burnout, through designing your own personalized detox programme, to learning from those who have recovered and from a large-scale international testing effort, and finally to breaking harmful digital habits and building healthier ones that last. If you are reading the guide for the first time, we recommend working through it in order and giving particular attention to Chapter 6, where you build your personal detox plan.

One principle runs through everything: the most effective approach is the one that fits your actual life. There is no single correct detox strategy that works for everyone. What research, practice, and lived experience all point to is this: personalization matters more than perfection. Throughout the guide, you will be invited to reflect, to make choices, and to build something that is genuinely yours.

PART I: Understanding the problem

2. Stress in the modern workplace

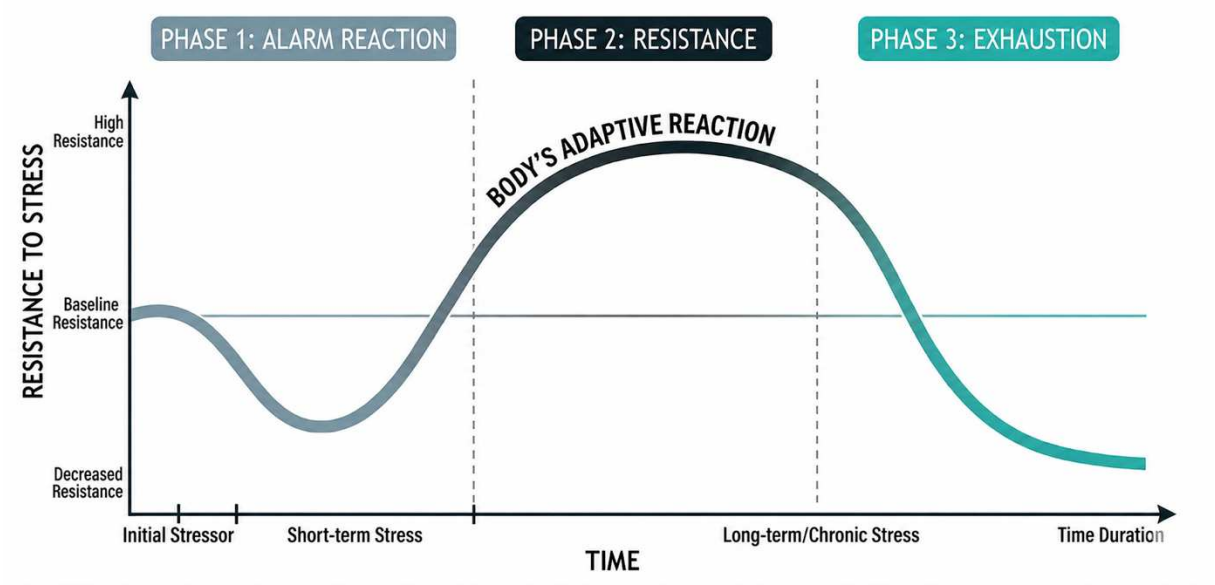
For most of human history, work meant physical exertion. Today, that picture has fundamentally changed. The demands placed on employees are increasingly psychological in nature — we process vast amounts of information, navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, make rapid decisions, and face relentless pressure to perform and adapt. When professional environments are poorly organised and managed, they do not dignify workers — they exhaust them. Stress has become one of the most significant psychosocial occupational hazards of our time.

2.1. What is stress and why do we have it?

Stress is the body's natural response to any demand placed upon it. When we perceive a challenge or threat, the body mobilises resources — releasing hormones, sharpening attention, increasing heart rate — to help us meet it. Selye (1956), often regarded as the father of stress research, described this as the *General Adaptation Syndrome* (GAS), unfolding in three stages: an initial *alarm reaction*, a *stage of resistance* during which the body adapts and fights back, and — if the stressor persists unchecked — a *stage of exhaustion*, where coping capacity is finally overwhelmed.

This response was shaped by evolution to deal with immediate physical threats. The challenge is that our bodies react in largely the same way to a looming deadline or a difficult conversation as they might to a genuine emergency. A mechanism designed for short-term survival becomes a long-term burden.

Figure 1. Illustration of General adaptation syndrome by Selye (1956).



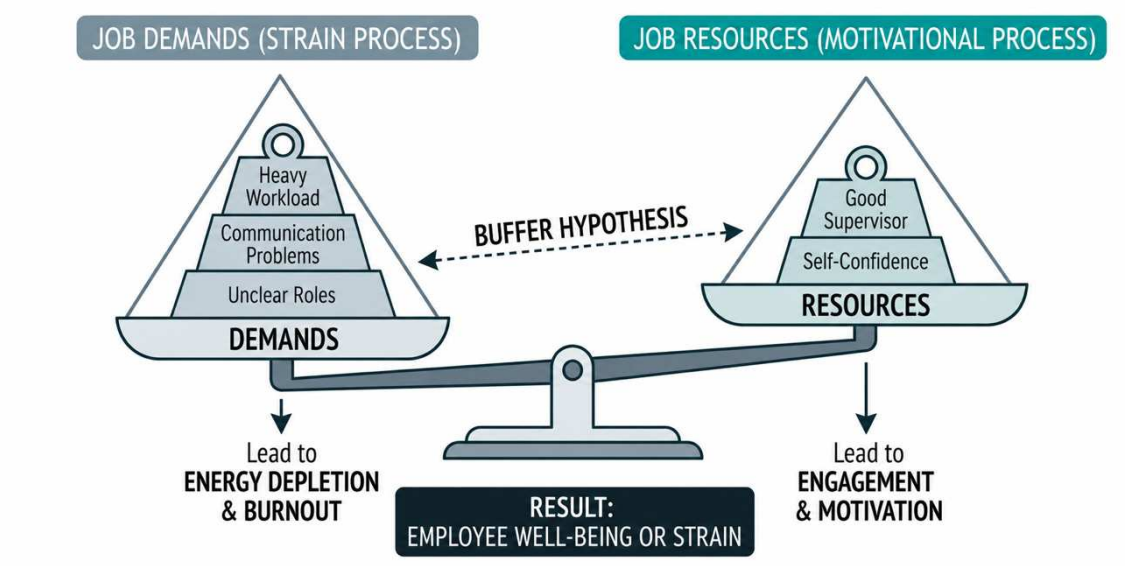
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2.2. Acute stress versus chronic stress

Not all stress is harmful. *Acute stress* is short-term and situational — the jolt of adrenaline before a presentation, the focus that kicks in when a deadline approaches, or responding to an unexpected problem at work. Once the situation resolves, the body returns to its normal state. Research suggests that moderate levels of arousal can even improve performance, a phenomenon known as the Yerkes-Dodson law (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). According to this, performance improves as arousal increases, but only up to an optimal point. When stress becomes too intense or prolonged, performance begins to decline. Thus, a moderate level of stress can help us stay motivated and focused, whereas excessive stress becomes counterproductive.

Chronic stress, by contrast, is persistent and cumulative. Instead of occasional activation, the body remains in a prolonged state of tension. It arises when demands consistently outpace an individual's ability — or perceived ability — to cope, without adequate recovery in between. According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), strain and eventual burnout become likely when the demands of work — such as information overload, emotional pressure, time constraints, constant connectivity — exceed the personal and organisational resources available to manage them.

Figure 2. Illustration of JD-R model by Bakker and Demerouti (2007).



Note. Image generated using Gemini, Google, 2026 (https://gemini.google.com).

2.3. When does stress become a problem, and what does it cost?

Stress becomes problematic when it is sustained and recovery is insufficient. The effects of chronic stress can be observed on multiple levels. Physically, individuals may experience fatigue, headaches, muscle tension, sleep disturbances, gastrointestinal problems, or increased vulnerability to illness. Emotionally, chronic stress is associated with irritability, anxiety, frustration, and reduced emotional resilience. Cognitively, it may impair concentration, decision-making, memory, and creativity (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022; Gray, 1998). From an organizational perspective, chronic stress contributes to absenteeism, presenteeism (being physically present but mentally absent), reduced productivity, workplace conflicts, and employee turnover. Across Central Europe, the economic losses associated with anxiety, depression, and potencially burnout, have been estimated at €202 billion annually (BURNOUT PREVENT Project, 2025). Stress, however, is manageable — and the first step is understanding it. This includes recognising the new and particular form of pressure that technology has introduced into modern working life.

3. Digital stress

We live and work in a world saturated with technology. Smartphones, email, instant messaging platforms, project management software, video conferencing tools — for most employees, these are now as fundamental to the working day as a desk and chair. The benefits are real: faster communication, flexible working, access to information on an unprecedented scale. But alongside these advantages, technology has introduced a new category of workplace stressor that researchers have come to call digital stress.

3.1. What is digital stress?

Digital stress refers to the psychological strain that arises from the use of digital technologies — not only in the workplace, but across all domains of life (Hefner & Vorderer, 2017). It is not simply a matter of struggling with a particular piece of software. What characterises digital stress is the broader experience

of digital technologies as demanding, overwhelming, or intrusive — the feeling that devices and platforms designed to make life easier have, in practice, generated new and persistent expectations.

Central to most definitions is the concept of permanent connectivity. Vorderer et al. (2016) describe a state they term "permanently online, permanently connected"— the experience of being expected, or feeling compelled, to be reachable and responsive at all times through digital channels. This expectation does not pause when the working day ends. It follows individuals into evenings, weekends, and personal time, generating a low-level tension that accumulates and compounds. Research has identified several common sources of digital stress, including technology overload, constant availability, increasing technological complexity, uncertainty resulting from continual technological changes, and concerns about keeping up with new digital demands (Tarafdar et al., 2007). Importantly, digital stress is not caused simply by technology itself. Rather, it results from the interaction between digital demands, work organisation and individual coping resources. The same technology may therefore be experienced as supportive by one employee but stressful by another.

3.2. Consequences of digital stress

The consequences of sustained digital stress are well-documented. At the psychological level, digital stress is associated with elevated anxiety, difficulty concentrating, emotional exhaustion, and reduced overall well-being (Hefner & Vorderer, 2017). A key mechanism is the disruption of psychological recovery. Recovery — the process through which individuals mentally detach from work demands and restore depleted emotional and cognitive resources — requires genuine disconnection from work-related stimuli. When digital tools allow work to follow individuals into their personal time, that recovery window narrows or disappears entirely (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Without sufficient recovery, stress accumulates rather than dissipates, substantially increasing the risk of burnout.

At the physical level, habitual digital device use — particularly in the hours before sleep — has been linked to disturbed sleep patterns, with downstream consequences for cognitive performance, immune function, and cardiovascular health (Hefner & Vorderer, 2017; Kumar, 2024; Thomée et al., 2011).

At the organisational level, unmanaged digital stress has been associated with lower job satisfaction, reduced performance, higher absenteeism and greater employee turnover (Kumar, 2024). As digital technologies continue to shape modern workplaces, recognising and managing digital stress has become an essential component of promoting employee well-being and preventing burnout.

4. Burnout syndrome

4.1. From stress to burnout

Stress and burnout are related, but they are not the same thing. Stress — even severe, chronic stress — implies that an individual is still engaged: overwhelmed, perhaps, but still fighting. Burnout is what emerges when that fight has continued for too long, without adequate support, rest, or recognition. It is a state of profound depletion. A useful distinction is this: if chronic stress is running a car on an empty tank, burnout is the engine seizing up entirely.

4.2. Defining burnout

The concept of burnout was introduced to the scientific literature by Freudenberger (1974), based on his observations of staff at a free clinic in New York — a setting largely run by volunteers working with people in serious mental and social difficulty. Staff members who had arrived with the greatest energy and

conviction were precisely the people who, over time, became progressively exhausted, disillusioned, and detached. He described burnout as a state of exhaustion, fatigue, and frustration arising from a professional activity that no longer produced the results — or the sense of meaning — that had once driven it. The term itself is deliberately evocative: like a fire that burns so intensely it ultimately consumes its own fuel. This was subsequently formalised by Maslach, whose work remains foundational to the field. Maslach and Jackson (1981) defined burnout as a psychological syndrome characterised by three interconnected dimensions:

Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalisation (cynicism)	Reduced personal accomplishment
A pervasive feeling of being emotionally drained and depleted — having given too much for too long, with too little replenishment.	A growing detachment, indifference, or negativity towards one's work, colleagues, or the people one serves — a protective distancing that over time becomes its own problem.	•A diminished sense of competence and efficacy, a creeping feeling that one's efforts no longer make a meaningful difference.

The World Health Organization has recognised the significance of burnout by including it in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon — not a clinical diagnosis in the traditional sense, but a condition arising specifically from the context of work. This matters, because it frames burnout not as a personal failing, but as a consequence of sustained exposure to certain working conditions.

4.3. Burnout causes

Burnout rarely springs from a single source. It develops gradually, at the intersection of external pressures (the demands and conditions of the job) and internal predispositions (the ways in which individuals habitually respond to those demands). Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with individuals who experienced and recovered from burnout, carried out across seven European countries as part of the BURNOUT PREVENT project, identified six distinct categories of contributing factors (BURNOUT PREVENT Project, 2025). These findings closely mirror the distinction between organisational and individual triggers well-established in the academic literature (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022).

1. Workload and task-related overload

Excessive workload encompasses long and unsustainable working hours, pressure to deliver under demanding conditions, and the expectation — whether imposed externally or self-imposed — to manage everything independently. What makes workload particularly damaging is its cumulative nature: not one difficult day, but the persistent absence of any relief.

2. Toxic or unsupportive work environment

Burnout is significantly shaped by the relational quality of the workplace. Environments characterised by bullying, mobbing, gaslighting, or sudden shifts in organisational culture following leadership changes, all compounded by a lack of support from supervisors or colleagues, can cause burnout. In these situations, the absence of a psychologically safe environment means that even ordinary demands may become overwhelming.

3. Lack of boundaries and overcommitment

Another possible cause is persistent difficulty in saying "no" — whether it involves additional responsibilities, requests from colleagues, or demands that significantly exceed the scope of an employee's formal duties. Without established protective boundaries, individuals remain chronically exposed to these situations without any mechanism for recovery.

4. Family, financial, and life stressors

Burnout does not unfold in a vacuum. Workplace pressures can be compounded by significant demands at home — family health crises, financial strain, the weight of single parenthood, or accumulated caregiving responsibilities. Life outside work is both a potential source of additional burden and, crucially, a potential source of recovery — and burnout tends to erode both.

5. Psychological dispositions

Furthermore, deeply ingrained personal behavioral patterns play a role. Almost without exception, people experiencing burnout cite perfectionism, the desire to please others, a strong need to prove their worth, difficulty asking for help, and suppressing their own needs as significant factors. These dispositions do not cause burnout on their own. But they determine how an individual responds to organisational pressures — whether boundaries get set, whether support is sought early, and whether rest is treated as a legitimate need.

6. Loss of purpose, meaning, and motivation

Finally, it is a more existential aspect of the experience: a gradual loss of direction, a feeling that one's work has lost its meaning, or that the goals one once pursued now seem empty. This aspect of burnout tends to be particularly relevant for knowledge workers and for those in positions where intrinsic motivation and a sense that their work is meaningful are of great importance.

Taken together, these six categories show that burnout is not simply the result of working too hard. It emerges from a specific constellation of pressures — organisational and personal, external and internal — that accumulate over time without adequate counterbalance. Recognising which of these factors may be active in one's own situation is often the first, and most important, step toward change.

4.4. Burnout symptoms

Burnout announces itself across multiple domains simultaneously. Within BURNOUT PREVENT Project (2025), we identified four broad categories of symptoms:

Physical symptoms commonly include chronic fatigue and persistent lack of energy, sleep disturbances, headaches, gastrointestinal complaints, back pain and muscle tension, increased vulnerability to infections, skin reactions, and hypersensitivity to noise or other sensory stimuli.

Emotional symptoms include irritability, reduced patience, sadness, pessimism, feelings of depression, unexpected crying episodes, guilt and shame, and a progressive erosion of internal motivation and drive.

Cognitive symptoms encompass difficulty concentrating, impaired decision-making, reduced effectiveness at work, and a loss of the sense of meaning or accomplishment in one's professional role.

Behavioural changes at work may include avoidance, procrastination, increased need for breaks, difficulty completing routine tasks, and social withdrawal from colleagues. In personal life, individuals commonly report isolation, neglect of previously enjoyable activities and relationships, and escalating conflict at home stemming from exhaustion or irritability.

These patterns are powerfully illustrated by the testimonies of individuals who experienced and recovered from burnout, gathered as part of the BURNOUT PREVENT project through qualitative interviews across seven European countries. Their accounts reveal a striking consistency across cultural contexts.

A participant from Croatia described dizziness, pressure, anxiety, and deep fatigue following an unsustainable routine of 15-16-hour working days, combined with demanding family caregiving responsibilities at home. A participant from Italy recalled a gradual decline that began with tiredness and developed into emotional numbness, insomnia, irritability, headaches, and stomach pain, until she found herself staring at emails, unable to respond, and freezing during an important presentation. From Poland, a participant described arriving to work early every morning just to cry before her shift began, realising "this was not sustainable." A participant from Slovakia, who would eventually experience three distinct burnout episodes, described cumulative signs including emotional exhaustion, insomnia, and a physical severe cough — symptoms she initially did not recognise as burnout at all.

This last point is significant. A recurring theme across all seven interviews was that burnout was not recognised in the moment, or was acknowledged only at a crisis point. Many participants identified their condition retrospectively, after recovery, or only after a doctor, therapist, or colleague named it for them. Receiving that label, they reported, was typically a source of relief: finally, an explanation for what was happening (BURNOUT PREVENT Project, 2025).

4.5. The consequences

When burnout is not recognised and addressed, its consequences deepen significantly.

At the individual level, sustained burnout is associated with serious psychological outcomes including clinical anxiety and depression. Physical health consequences include chronically elevated cortisol levels, increased cardiovascular risk, and greater susceptibility to type 2 diabetes (Demerouti et al., 2024; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Recovery is rarely swift: the individuals interviewed for this project reported recovery timelines ranging from several months to three or four years, typically requiring major changes not just in work habits but in life circumstances, and fundamental beliefs about work, identity, and self-worth (BURNOUT PREVENT Project, 2025).

For organisations, burned-out employees represent a significant loss of capacity: reduced performance and quality of output, higher rates of absenteeism and staff turnover, and diminished team morale. Research on emotional contagion suggests that burnout can even spread — exhausted, cynical colleagues can gradually affect the motivation and well-being of those around them (Demerouti et al., 2024; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022).

Yet recovery is possible. Each of the individuals interviewed for this project found their way through. Their experiences — what helped, what did not, and what they would tell their earlier selves — inform the practical guidance offered in the chapters that follow.

PART II: Digital detox as a solution

5. What is digital detox?

Digital detox is an intentional, time-limited period during which a person reduces or completely suspends the use of digital devices and online platforms (Nassen et al., 2023; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). The term covers a wide spectrum of approaches — from switching off all devices for a full weekend to simply muting social media notifications in the evening (Radtke et al., 2022). What all these approaches share is deliberateness: digital detox is a conscious decision to step back, not a passive drift away from screens.

5.1. What does digital detox research tell us?

A growing body of evidence confirms that intentional disconnection from technology produces real, measurable benefits. In terms of specific outcomes, the most consistent finding across studies is an improvement in well-being and a reduction in symptoms of depression (Radtke et al., 2022). One controlled study found that a week of social media abstinence significantly reduced fear of missing out (FoMO) and increased both mental well-being and social connectedness (Brown & Kuss, 2020). Another showed that even a one-week combination of reduced smartphone use and increased physical activity led to better work satisfaction, improved work-life balance, and fewer depressive symptoms (Brailovskaia et al., 2024). Using a screen-time tracking app helped users lower both habitual phone-checking and overall daily usage (Schraggeová & Bisaha, 2025).

A comprehensive scoping review analysed 12 empirical studies involving over 3,000 participants and proposed several non-work digital detox strategies — practised deliberately outside of working hours (Štánerová et al., 2025). This review identified six categories of methods people actually use to disconnect:

- **Device restriction** — switching off the phone, going offline or into airplane mode
- **App control** — deleting or avoiding specific apps and platforms
- **Notification management** — disabling push alerts, using Do Not Disturb settings
- **Time management** — scheduling regular tech-free windows during breaks or evenings
- **Self-regulation and agreements —** personal commitments (e.g., no email after 5 PM) or shared household rules
- **Monitoring tools** — apps that track screen time and raise awareness of usage patterns

The evidence does not support a one-size-fits-all approach. More moderate, selective strategies tend to be just as effective as complete disconnection — and considerably more sustainable in everyday life. A crucial

insight: the benefits of digital detox come not only from being away from screens, but equally from what people do instead. Engaging in offline activities — movement, socializing face-to-face, time in nature, creative hobbies — is what makes detox genuinely restorative. Disconnecting without a plan for offline engagement may produce weaker and shorter-lived effects.

6. Building your own digital detox program

There is no universal detox plan that works for everyone. The research is clear on this: the most effective approach is a personalized one — adapted to your digital habits, your schedule, and your goals. The BURNOUT PREVENT project (2024) developed a structured, evidence-based Catalogue of Digital Detox Activities to help you design exactly that. The planning process consists of three steps.

Step 1: Choose your detox level

Your first decision is how deeply you want to disconnect. Three levels are available, each defined by which technologies are restricted.

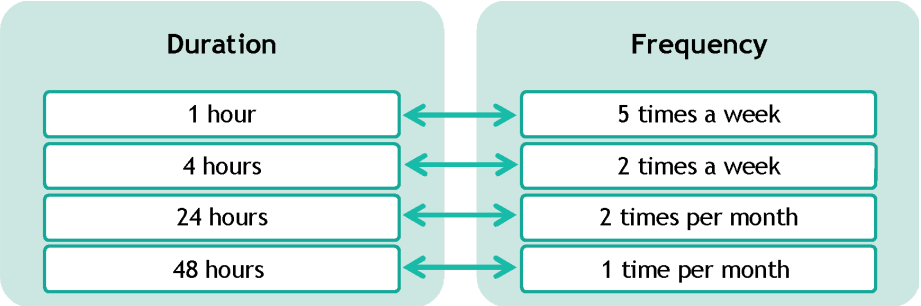
- **Total digital detox (device-level)** means complete disconnection from all digital technologies — smartphone, computer, internet, television, and wearables. Before the detox period, devices are switched off or put away, and people around you are notified of your unavailability. This is the most demanding level, best suited to those who feel significantly overloaded and are ready for a genuine reset.
- **Partial digital detox (platform-level)** restricts interactive technologies — messaging, browsing, email, and social media — while allowing passive media such as television, radio, and streaming services. A medium-challenge option that most people find workable alongside everyday responsibilities.
- **Selective digital detox (feature/app-level)** means disconnecting only from specific applications — typically social media and messaging — while continuing to use the phone for navigation, calls, or other practical purposes. The lowest-challenge level and a sensible starting point for anyone new to intentional detox.

One important principle applies across all three: choose a level that is genuinely challenging for you personally. If you rarely use social media, a social-media-only detox will not push your actual digital habits. The goal is meaningful change.

Step 2: Choose your time horizon

Duration and frequency matter as much as the depth of disconnection. Four paired combinations are available - each time length has a set amount of time for how often it needs to be performed.

Figure 3. Duration and frequency of digital detox.



Choose one combination and stick to it consistently throughout the programme. Results from the international testing phase (Chapter 8) show that participants overwhelmingly preferred shorter but more frequent sessions — and this preference aligns with what the research predicts about sustainable behaviour change. A daily one-hour detox builds a reliable rhythm; an occasional 48-hour disconnection can be valuable but is harder to maintain over time.

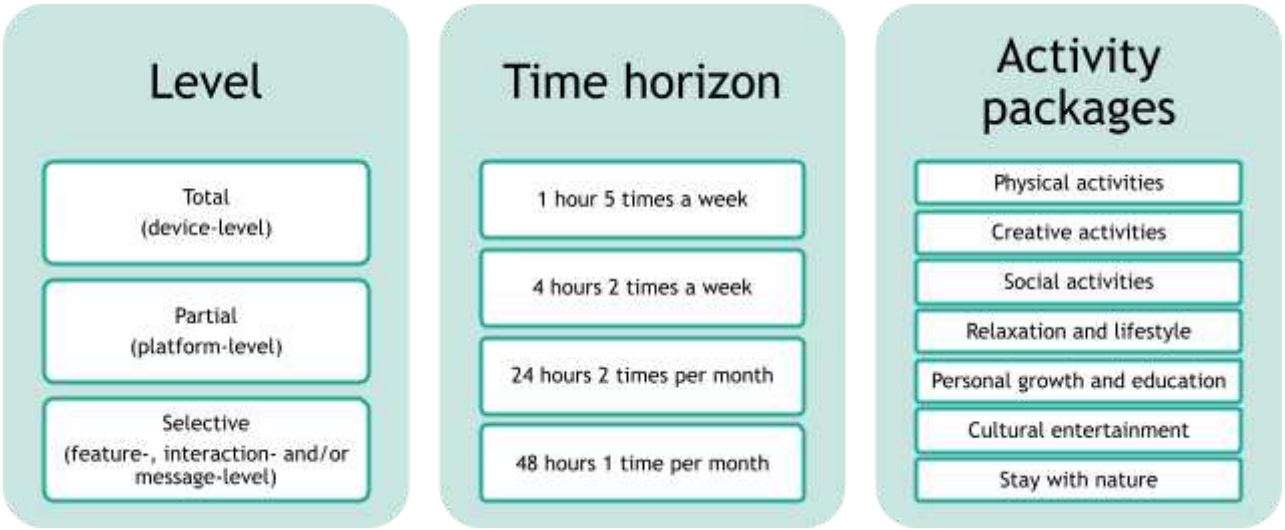
Step 3: Choose your activities

Stepping away from screens without a concrete plan for what to do instead tends not to work. The Catalogue offers seven activity packages — broad categories identified in literature (Štánerová et al., 2025) within which you can rotate freely depending on your mood and available time:

- **Physical activities** — hiking, cycling, running, swimming, yoga, dancing, team sports,…
- **Creative activities** — painting, drawing, writing, cooking, baking, handcrafts, puzzles,…
- **Social activities** — meeting friends or family in person, board games, café visits,…
- **Relaxation and lifestyle** — meditation, mindfulness, deep breathing, long bath, listening to music,…
- **Personal growth and education** — reading books, workshops, language learning, volunteering,…
- **Cultural entertainment** — visiting a museum, gallery, theatre, historical sites, or festival,…
- **Stay with nature** — walks in the woods, gardening, camping, birdwatching, time with pets,…

Choose two or three packages that genuinely appeal to you. Within each package, you can vary what you do from session to session — what matters is that the time is purposefully spent offline. Once you have made your three choices — level, time horizon, activity packages — you have a complete personal detox plan you can begin straight away.

Figure 4. Overview of the digital detox program. The program can be made up of different digital detox levels (choose one), time horizons (choose one) and activity packages (choose 2-3).



Part III: What worked in practise

7. What can we learn from people who recovered from burnout?

Theory and data are valuable, but so is the lived experience of people who have actually been through burnout and found their way out. As part of the BURNOUT PREVENT project (2025), seven in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals across partner countries who had personally experienced burnout and subsequently recovered. Despite coming from different professional contexts and countries, their accounts revealed strikingly consistent patterns in how burnout unfolded, how recovery happened, and, crucially, what helped versus what made things worse.

A thematic analysis of these interviews produced a practical Do's and Don'ts checklist. These are not abstract recommendations — they are a distillation of insight from people who lived through one of the most demanding experiences a working person can face.

Several themes run through all seven recovery stories. Boundary-setting — the ability to say no, protect personal time, and ask for help — emerged as perhaps the most universally critical skill. Professional support, whether therapy, coaching, or peer support, played a central role in every account. Physical activity, time in nature, and genuine rest were consistently named as the activities that made the biggest practical difference. And nearly every participant shared the same timing lesson: act earlier than feels necessary. By the time burnout is unmistakable, it is already significantly harder to address.

Table 1. Do's and Don'ts for burnout prevention and recovery.

DO'S (recommended actions)
⭐ **Set and communicate boundaries** - say "no" without feeling guilty at work and in personal life.
⚖️ **Maintain work-life balance** and clearly separate work from free time.
🩺 **Listen to your body** and take early physical or emotional signals seriously.
🗣️ **Seek support early** - talk openly with colleagues, friends, or professionals.
🪞 **Practice self-reflection** - silence, identifying needs, self-awareness.
⏸️ **Plan regular rest and recovery** - micro-breaks, quiet rituals, moments of solitude.
📚 **Educate yourself** about stress, burnout, and healthy coping strategies.
🌱 **Try new activities** (volunteering, hobbies) to regain balance and perspective.
📤 **Delegate when possible** and let go of unnecessary control.
🐢 **Take small, steady steps** toward balance and lifestyle adjustments.
🛡️ **Act preventively** — don't wait until exhaustion becomes overwhelming.
DON'TS (behaviours to avoid)
🚫 **Ignore physical or emotional warning signs** ("I can still handle it").
🔥 **Overcommit** or push yourself beyond your personal limits.
⏰ **Work chronic overtime** or sacrifice rest and personal life for work.
🙊 **Stay silent or avoid issues** instead of addressing them.
⚠️ **Remain in toxic environments** or around people who pressure you to push harder.
🙇 **Seek external validation** or prioritize pleasing others over your health.
☕ **Mask symptoms with quick fixes** (e.g., don't combat fatigue with coffee, sugar, or overeating).
📅 **Fill all your free time with obligations** instead of genuine rest.
💼 **Ignore the need for major change** (e.g., leaving a harmful job).

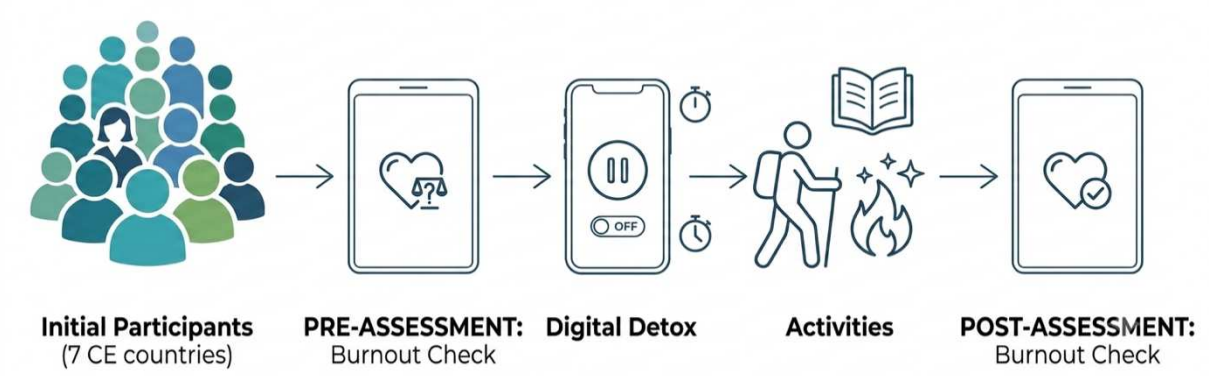
8. Results from the international testing phase

The BURNOUT PREVENT project did not just develop a digital detox programme — it tested one (BURNOUT PREVENT Project, 2026). Over three months, employees from seven European countries committed to a structured digital detox and reported their burnout levels before and after. Here is what the data showed.

8.1. How the study worked

The intervention ran across Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In each country, approximately 40 participants from SMEs in smart specialisation sectors joined a national focus group and committed to a 12-week detox programme. Each participant designed their own plan — choosing one detox level, one time horizon, and two to three activity packages — and then implemented it in their daily lives outside working hours. Burnout was assessed at the start and again at the end of the programme. A total of 143 participants provided complete pre- and post-intervention data and are included in the results.

Figure 5. Illustrative overview of the intervention procedure.



Note. Image generated using Gemini, Google, 2026 (https://gemini.google.com).

8.2. Who participated

The sample was predominantly female (74%), with a mean age of 41 years. Most held permanent employment contracts (76%) and worked in mentally demanding roles. The majority had a Master's degree or higher (59%). The group represents a realistic cross-section of knowledge workers in Central European organisations.

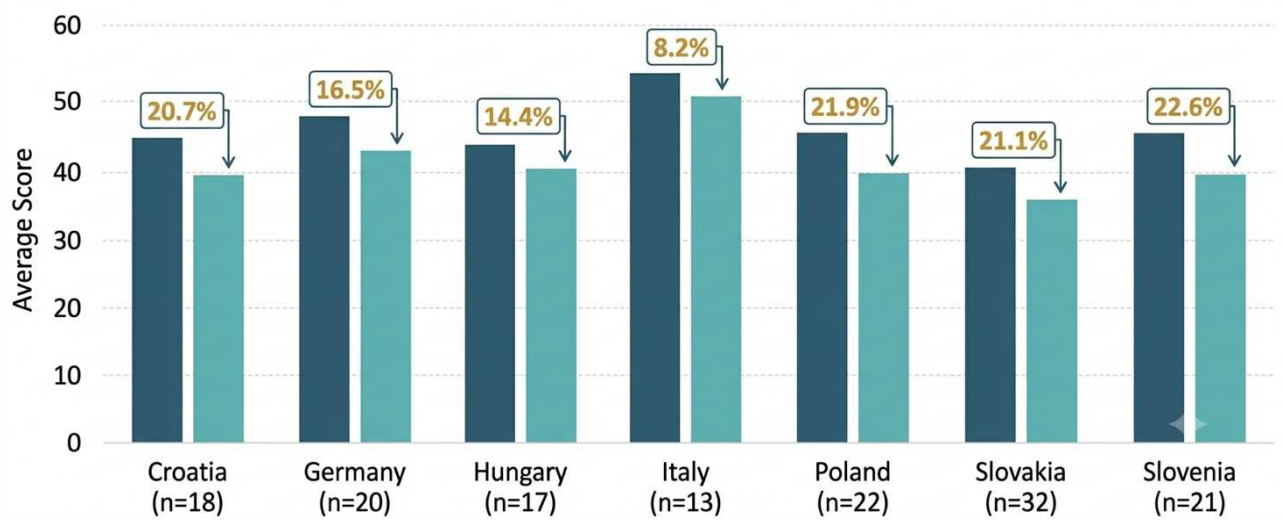
8.3. Results

TOTAL SAMPLE. The programme produced a clear reduction in burnout. Average burnout scores dropped from 45.7 before the programme to 40.6 after — an 18.7% reduction. On average, each participant's burnout score decreased by approximately 5 points, reflecting a meaningful improvement in day-to-day stress. This improvement was statistically significant and consistent across all seven countries.

BY COUNTRY. Burnout decreased in every country. The strongest reductions were in Slovenia, Poland, Slovakia, and Croatia. Italy showed the smallest decrease (8.2%), partly reflecting a smaller participant

sample there. Despite these differences, the direction of change was the same everywhere — suggesting that the benefits of digital detox are not specific to a single national or cultural context.

Graph 1. Results by country.



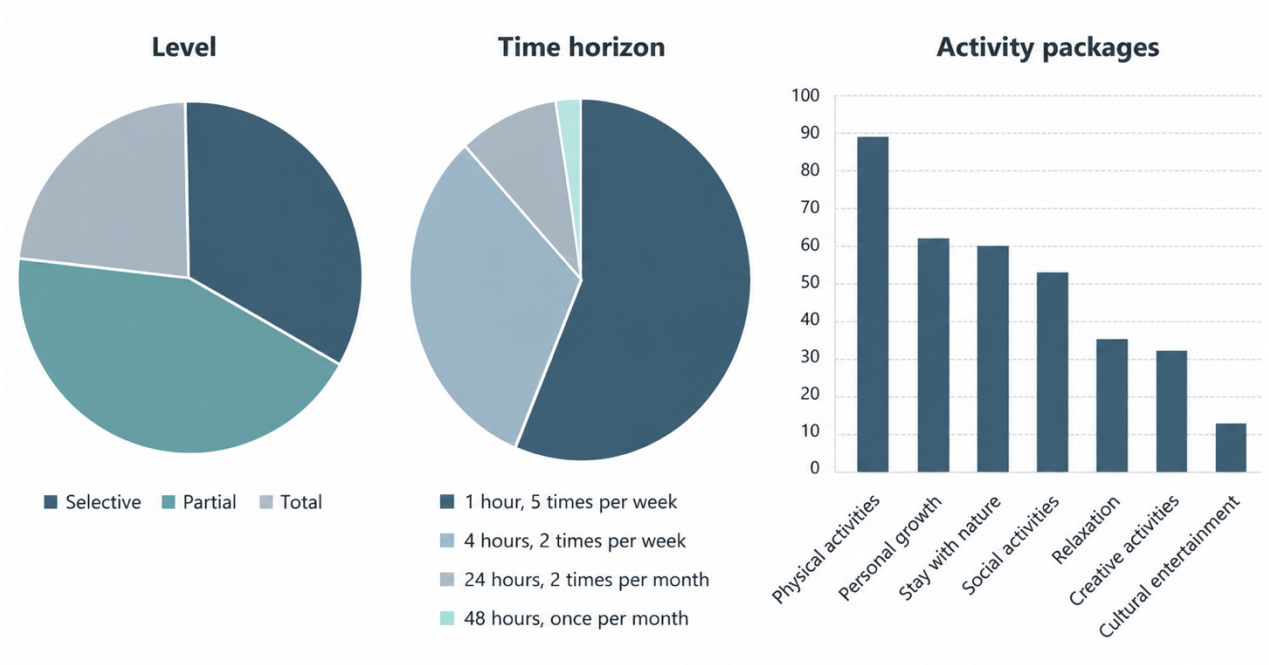
Note. n = number of participants. Dark column: pre-test; light column: post-test.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS CHOSE. When left to design their own plan, participants showed clear preferences. For detox level, **partial detox** was the most popular (44%), followed by selective (34%) and total detox (23%). Most people preferred moderate over complete disconnection.

For time horizons, **1 hour five times a week** was chosen by 55% of participants, followed by 4 hours twice a week (35%). Very few opted for the longer 24-hour or 48-hour formats. The pattern is clear: in practice, people favour frequent and short over rare and long.

For activities, **physical activities** were the most popular choice, selected by 73% of participants, followed by personal growth and education (51%) and staying in nature (49%). Cultural entertainment was chosen least often (11%). The strong preference for movement and nature-based activities is consistent with research on their restorative effects — and reinforces the importance of choosing activities that genuinely appeal to you.

Graph 2. Digital detox preferences for the total sample.



9. Lessons learned

Running a digital detox programme across seven countries provided practical insights that no amount of desk research could fully anticipate. While the results confirmed that detox works, the process revealed just as much about the conditions that make it effective — and where it tends to struggle. These lessons are directly relevant for anyone planning a personal detox.

Motivation is the foundation

The clearest predictor of success was not which detox level participants chose or which activities they picked — it was whether they genuinely wanted to change their relationship with technology. It is possible that participants who joined out of real personal interest showed stronger commitment, more consistency, and better outcomes than those who participated primarily due to external encouragement. Sustaining a digital detox over weeks requires ongoing motivation, not just an initial decision.

Before starting, it is worth asking yourself honestly: why do I want to do this, and what does a healthier relationship with technology look like for me? The more personal and specific your answer, the more resilient your commitment will be when the initial novelty fades.

Personalization is a condition of effectiveness, not a comfort feature

One of the clearest findings from the international testing phase is that digital detox does not work identically for everyone. People differ in their digital habits, work demands, personal rhythms, and life

circumstances. The most effective approaches are those that adapt to the individual. A plan that fits your actual life is a plan you can sustain.

This is precisely why the three-step design process in Chapter 6 matters. When participants built their own detox plan rather than following a fixed protocol, engagement and follow-through were higher. Flexibility — selecting your own level, time horizon, and activities — is not a compromise on rigour. It is what makes the programme work.

Shorter and more frequent may beat longer and rare

Both the research literature and the actual preferences of participants point in the same direction: short, frequent detox periods are more sustainable and easier to maintain over time than occasional intensive disconnections (Radtke et al., 2022; Štánerová et al., 2025). Participants overwhelmingly chose one hour five times a week over a full weekend once a month. A daily rhythm of recovery accumulates far more than a periodic reset. If you are just starting out, protect a short but regular slot. Consistency matters more than scale.

What you do offline is as important as going offline

Perhaps the most practically important finding: substitute activities are not a bonus dimension of digital detox — they are a mechanism. Physical activities and time in nature were the most popular choices among participants, and their strong preference aligns with what we know about the restorative effects of movement and outdoor environments. The well-being improvements observed in the testing phase arose not only from reduced screen time, but from active engagement in meaningful offline experiences.

Concretely: before each detox session, know what you will do. Detox works best not when you sit with the absence of a phone, but when you are doing something that genuinely engages you elsewhere.

Shared commitment strengthens follow-through

Participants who had the opportunity to share their experiences with others — even briefly, at the start and end of the programme — reported higher engagement and a greater sense of accountability throughout. This effect does not require a formal group. Telling a friend or partner about your detox plan, and checking in with them occasionally, serves the same function. A commitment made visible to someone else is substantially more likely to be kept than one made only to yourself.

Part IV: Making the change last

10. How to maintain healthy digital habits

Designing a personal detox plan is a meaningful step. Maintaining it — through busy weeks, setbacks, and the slow return of old patterns — is where the real work happens. Digital habits are deeply ingrained: they are reinforced by the design of the technologies themselves, by workplace culture, and by the social expectations of people around us. Changing them sustainably requires more than initial motivation. It requires structure, self-awareness, and a willingness to iterate. The following strategies are grounded in both the research literature and the practical experience of participants from the testing phase.

Start small

The most common mistake when changing habitual behaviour is beginning too ambitiously. A plan you cannot realistically sustain is not a plan — it is a gesture. Starting smaller than feels necessary is not a sign of low commitment; it is how durable change actually works.

Build routines, not rules

Rules feel like constraints to be overcome. Routines become part of how life simply works. The distinction matters enormously for long-term adherence. Rather than imposing a rule ("I am not allowed to check my phone after dinner"), design a routine that makes not checking the phone the default. Put the device in another room, have an evening activity ready, let the routine carry you. Habits embedded in existing routines are far more durable than those that require constant deliberate activation.

Monitor your screen use honestly

You cannot change what you do not clearly see. People may underestimate how much time they spend on their devices and how often they pick them up without intention or purpose. Most smartphones include built-in usage tracking, such as Screen Time on iOS, Digital Wellbeing on Android. Make reviewing this data a brief weekly habit, not to criticize yourself, but to stay accurately informed. Look for patterns: which applications consume the most time, at which points in the day mindless checking spikes and so on, because the more precisely you understand your own patterns, the more specifically you can address them.

Set goals that are realistic and specific

Vague intentions do not produce reliable behaviour. "I want to use my phone less" is not actionable. "I will not check work email between 9 PM and 7:30 AM on weekdays" is. When formulating detox goals, make them as concrete as possible: which device, which application, which hours, which days. It also helps to distinguish between reduction goals (less time on specific platforms or tools) and replacement goals (spending that time doing something concrete instead). Both matter, but replacement goals — having a specific offline activity in mind — tend to be more effective, because they give you something to move toward rather than just something to avoid. Absence is harder to sustain than substitution.

Involve family and colleagues

Digital habits do not exist in isolation. They are partly shaped by the implicit and explicit expectations of the people around you. If your household's default evening activity involves everyone on their own devices, protecting offline time requires more conscious effort. If your team has normalized instant responses to messages at all hours, disconnecting means actively managing those expectations.

You do not need everyone around you to change their habits. You do need them to understand yours. Share your detox plan with people at home and at work. Consider proposing simple shared agreements, such as no phones during mealtimes. Talk to colleagues about response-time expectations during your offline hours.

Review your progress regularly

Change rarely moves in a straight line. Some weeks will go well; others will not. Regular, brief reflection (e.g., once a month) prevents two equally common failure modes: drifting back into old patterns without noticing, and becoming discouraged by imperfect adherence.

Use the Reflection Sheet in Chapter 11 as a structured prompt. The goal is not to evaluate yourself harshly, but to ask honestly: what worked well and what did not? A plan that you revise based on real experience is almost always more effective than one that remains fixed regardless of what actually happens in your life.

11. Personal digital well-being action plan

Take 15–20 minutes to work through the sections below. Answer honestly. Keep the completed plan somewhere you will see it — and return to it once a month to check your progress.

My biggest digital stressors

What aspects of digital technology create the most stress in my daily life? (e.g., work email outside office hours, social media, news, constant notifications, video calls, being always reachable...)

_____
_____
_____

My burnout warning signs

What signals — physical, emotional, cognitive, or behavioural — tell me that I am approaching exhaustion? (e.g., sleep disruption, irritability, difficulty concentrating, loss of motivation, physical tension, withdrawing from people...)

_____
_____
_____

My motivation

Why do I want to improve my relationship with digital technology? What will be different in my life when I do?

_____
_____
_____

My chosen detox level (tick one)

☐ Total — complete disconnection from all digital devices during detox periods

☐ Partial — no interactive use (messaging, email, social media, browsing), but passive media allowed

☐ Selective — disconnect from specific apps or functions only

What exactly I will restrict (which devices, apps, or functions):

_____
_____
_____

My time horizon (tick one)

☐ 1 hour – 5 times per week

☐ 4 hours – 2 times per week

☐ 24 hours – 2 times per month

☐ 48 hours – 1 time per month

My preferred days and times for detox sessions:

_____

_____

_____

My selected activity packages (tick 2-3)

☐ Physical activities ☐ Creative activities ☐ Social activities ☐ Relaxation and lifestyle

☐ Personal growth and education ☐ Cultural entertainment ☐ Stay with nature

Specific activities I plan to do during my detox sessions:

_____

_____

_____

My support person

Who will I share this plan with? Who can check in with me during the programme?

Name: _____

How we will check in: _____

My plan for the next month

One concrete, specific commitment for the next four weeks:

My first detox session will be on: _____

I will review my progress on: _____

12. Reflection sheet

Return to this page after each month of your detox practice — or whenever you feel the need to recalibrate.

What worked?

Which strategies or activities made a real difference? What felt sustainable and right?

What was difficult?

Where did you struggle?

What surprised me?

Was there anything unexpected about the experience — positive or negative?

What did I notice about myself?

What did this process reveal about your digital habits, your stress patterns, or your needs?

What will I do differently next month?

One specific adjustment to your plan:

My overall rating of this past month

(1 = struggled significantly, made little progress — 5 = felt genuinely restorative and sustainable)

13. Final recommendations

Every guide needs a last page, but this one has a different purpose. Not to summarize everything that came before — you have already read it — but to leave you with the things most worth remembering when the reading is done and the real work begins.

Digital stress is real, and its effects accumulate. The fatigue that comes from constant connectivity is not weakness and it is not imaginary. It is a documented physiological and psychological response to sustained cognitive overload.

You have more agency than it often feels. Much of our digital behaviour is habitual and automatic, driven by the design of the technologies we use. But habits can be changed. Agency starts with the decisions in this guide: what level to choose, what hours to protect, what to do instead.

Small and consistent may beat large and occasional. One protected hour most evenings, maintained over months, is worth more than a dramatic digital fast you repeat twice a year.

What you do offline matters as much as going offline. The benefits of digital detox are driven as much by engagement in restorative offline activities as by absence from screens. Walking, reading, cooking, being with people, spending time in nature — these are not consolation prizes for putting the phone away. They are the mechanism.

Progress is not linear, and that is normal. You will have weeks where the plan holds easily and weeks where it falls apart. Neither defines the trajectory.

Prevention is always easier than recovery. If this guide reaches you before burnout does, use it that way. The people whose stories appear in Chapter 7 all said the same thing: they wished they had acted earlier, at the first signs, before the breaking point arrived. You are reading this before your breaking point. That is the advantage — use it.

You do not have to do this alone. Share your plan with someone. Check in with a colleague. Involve your family. The social dimension of behaviour change is consistently underestimated. The participants in our testing programme who had others to report back to maintained their detox practice more reliably and found it more meaningful.

This guide is the beginning of something, not the end. Return to it. Revise your plan. Use the reflection sheets. And remember that the goal is not a perfect relationship with technology — it is a deliberate one.

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