Praise for *Dear Digital, We need to talk*

‘Finally, a pragmatic book that helps you take back control of those wayward tech habits and helps knowledge workers thrive in a world of digital distractions.’

Dominic Price | Work Futurist at Atlassian and TED speaker

‘Kristy’s work stands out as the perfect blend of art and science – solidly evidence-based and masterfully relatable. She patiently takes the reader through the “why” of our habits and behaviours before sharing how to adapt. Don’t put this book on your holiday reading pile; read it now and start living a higher-resolution life.’

Katherine Milesi | Strategic Advisor, Digital Transformation, Deloitte Asia Pacific

‘*Dear Digital, We need to talk* is a really practical guide to empowering yourself to use technology in a mindful and intentional way. It’s full of science-backed tips you can put in place today to make technology work for you.’

Sophie Scott | Adjunct Associate Professor, University of Notre Dame Australia; author; speaker | sophiescott.com.au

‘Dr Kristy has written a fabulous book that we all need as we navigate living, working and parenting in this digital age. She weaves the science with a good dose of common sense and humour and most importantly, she gives doable strategies that can tame technology.’

Maggie Dent | Bestselling parenting author, educator and host of ABC’s *Parental as Anything* podcast

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Dear Digital, *We need to talk...*

A GUILT-FREE GUIDE TO TAMING YOUR TECH HABITS AND THRIVING IN A DISTRACTED WORLD

Dr Kristy Goodwin

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About the author

Having personally experienced how our always-on digital culture is compromising people's wellbeing and is counter to optimal and sustainable performance, award-winning researcher and speaker Dr Kristy Goodwin is on a mission to promote employee wellbeing and bolster workplace productivity in an always-on digital world.

As a digital wellbeing and productivity expert, she shares practical, brain-based hacks to tame tech habits, along with the latest evidence-based strategies to decode the neurobiology of peak performance in the technological era.

Dr Kristy is regularly called on by the media for her expert opinion on how our digitalised lives are impacting our focus and wellbeing. She translates the latest research into realistic strategies to help people tame their tech habits, without suggesting that we cancel Zoom meetings, go on a digital detox or cancel our Netflix subscriptions.

Senior business leaders and HR executives from Australia's top organisations engage Dr Kristy to help them promote employee digital wellbeing and performance. Her roster of clients includes Apple, AMP, Deutsche Bank, Bank of Queensland, Challenger, Westpac, DLA Piper, McDonald's, Scentre Group, Randstad, the Reserve Bank of Australia, Cuscal, National Broadband Network and Foxtel.

Dr Kristy delivers keynotes and workshops on stage and online from her professional, custom-built studio. She delivers consultancy services to help organisations establish their digital guardrails: the digital norms, practices and principles that underpin effective and productive use of digital technologies in hybrid or remote settings.

Dr Kristy is on a mission to help people stop being slaves to the screen and thrive in the digital world.

Preface

Warning – your digital diagnosis

Jessica tossed her daughter Harper's school bag in the back of the car, climbed into the driver's seat and winked at her in the rear vision mirror. She started to ask Harper about her day at school when a phone call interjected. She ignored the call, and when the voicemail notification illuminated her screen, she could also see the myriad of other notifications that had accumulated in the short time she'd left her phone in the car to walk into after-school care to pick up Harper. *Not another message*, Jessica thought. Her technostress was rising yet again.

Harper glanced out the window, feeling despondent that her mum's phone had once again diverted her attention. Harper interrupted her mum's spiralling thoughts and foreboding sense of overwhelm. 'Mum, how much do you earn per hour?'

Jessica was as perplexed by Harper's question as she was proud of it. She explained that she earned a salary and would need to do some calculations to answer Harper's question.

Later that night, after dealing with the voicemail issue, triaging her inbox and replying to the multitude of WhatsApp messages that had amassed during the day, she went into Harper's bedroom to read with her and kiss her goodnight. She climbed into Harper's bed and explained that she'd done some calculations to determine her 'hourly rate'. She expected Harper to be impressed by the number, or perhaps to start asking about potential career options.

Instead, Harper turned and said to her mum, 'Okay, I'd like to buy an hour of your time *without* your phone. Now I know how much pocket money I'll need.'

Jessica gasped, held her chest and closed her eyes. This is not how she wanted her daughter to remember her childhood, with her mum – and often her dad – constantly tethered to technology.

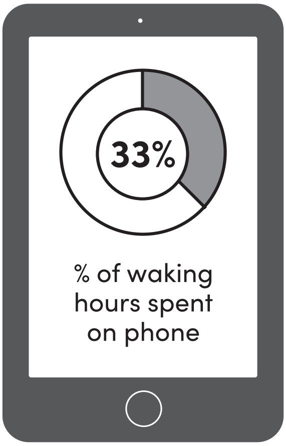
Jessica tried to mentally reconcile the stinging words her daughter had innocently said. *She was often on her phone, working, so she could be with Harper at soccer. She was checking emails while cooking dinner. She was doing her makeup and trying to reply to the SMS her friend had sent three days earlier.* However, she knew that her digital load had grown exponentially in recent times – especially since she started to work remotely three days a week – and that, as hard as it was to admit, she was often staring at her phone. Digital intruders had started to creep into *every* crevice of her life.

Jessica's story is not unique. You can likely see yourself in this story or in a similar scenario, even if you don't have children.

Many of us knowledge workers – people who spend the bulk of our workday using a laptop or desktop computer – are spending more time attached to technology. In fact, research indicated that during the COVID-19 pandemic adults were spending an average of 13.28 hours per day on digital devices! It has been estimated that the average Australian will spend almost 17 years of their life on their phone, equating to around 33 per cent of their waking hours (see figure 0.1 opposite).

We've become slaves to the screen, both professionally and personally.

Figure 0.1: The Average Aussie's phone use



Let's do a quick 'digital diagnosis'. Which of the following conditions and experiences have you encountered?

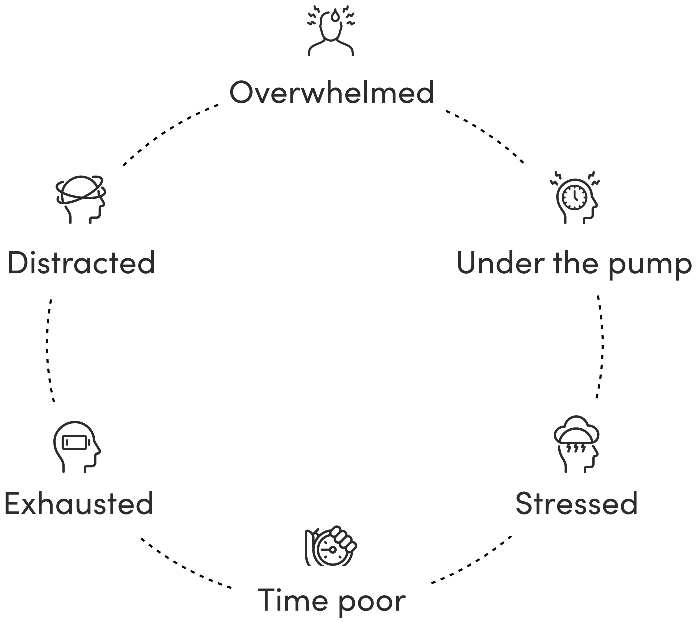
- **Digital dementia:** The shrinkage of people's memory-making capacity because of digital reliance. Can you remember more than three phone numbers without looking at your phone?
- **Techno-tantrum:** When a 'screenager' who is usually well-adjusted emotionally combusts when digitally disconnected.
- **Email apnoea:** Unconsciously holding your breath or breathing shallowly when responding to emails (or when engaged in other screen activities).
- **Nomophobia:** The fear of not having your phone in close proximity.
- **Toilet tweeting:** Research suggests that up to 40% of adults now use their smartphones while sitting on the loo.
- **Digital burnout:** The depletion of energy, exhaustion, apathy or cynicism towards work, and reduced efficacy resulting from intense digital activity.

- **Digital depletion:** The mental exhaustion resulting from looking at a screen all day.
- **Phantom vibration syndrome:** That tingling feeling that your phone or smartwatch is ringing when it's nowhere near your body.
- **Availability creep:** Feeling obligated to be available and responsive to work requests all the time, including outside work hours.
- **Calendar Tetris:** The problem of constantly needing to shuffle items on your calendar because there are too many of them to fit.
- **Infobesity:** Oversaturation of information. As adults, we're processing 74 gigabytes of data each day, and it's making us ill.
- **Biological buffers (or, rather, the lack thereof):** Sleep, physical movement, breathing, sunlight exposure and connection are buffers baked into our days to help us cope with the stress caused by our tech habits. Are you losing yours?
- **Wired and tired:** Not wanting to switch off or put down that phone. Our digital habits over the entirety of the day are eroding the quality and quantity of our sleep. Revenge bedtime procrastination, anyone?
- **Digital micro-stressors:** The everyday little stressors – emails, text messages, Zoom meetings, alerts and notifications – that might seem quite benign or insignificant but accumulate over time and leave us feeling stressed.
- **Smombie**: 'Smartphone zombie' – a person crossing busy city streets while engrossed in their smartphone or wearing headphones.
- **Tech neck:** Frequent neck pain after a day hunched over your computer.
- **Digital eye strain:** A cluster of symptoms, such as headaches, blurred vision, dry eyes and tech neck, caused by staring at a screen.

- **Meeting bloat:** Too many virtual meetings, caused by the zero cost of inclusion (it's easier to send a calendar invitation to 15 people than to call 15 people to arrange a meeting time).
- **Zoom-bombing:** Unwanted, disruptive intrusions while on video calls (such as partially clothed children and/or partners).

Our unhealthy digital dependencies are having significant impacts on our mental wellbeing, physical health and productivity. Just like Jessica, many of us are feeling digitally depleted and, as a result, we are OUSTED (see figure 0.2).

Figure 0.2: OUSTED



The pandemic ushered in permanent and significant changes to how we work. We've seen radical shifts in how, where and when we work. These changes happened almost instantaneously and without a lot of guidance regarding best practice. Many of us walked out of our office in March 2020 with our laptop under our arm and were thrust into remote work. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella stated that organisations underwent two years of digital transformation in two months.

The rise of digitisation due to remote work – and now hybrid work – has brought with it a perceived need always to be on, and with that our wellbeing and productivity have taken a hit. We've adopted digital behaviours that are incongruent with our neurobiology – how we as humans actually operate, which is our human operating system (hOS).

This is why many people are experiencing 'digital burnout'. Digital burnout results from unhealthy and unsustainable digital behaviours that leave us feeling stressed. We spend our days bouncing between emails, WhatsApp messages, Microsoft Teams meetings, Trello boards, Slack chats and social media DMs. The potential productivity gains that remote and hybrid work promised are under threat from the barrage of digital distractions, and from remote work norms and practices that conflict with our basic biological needs. For example, research with EEG machines confirms that brain fatigue sets in between 30 and 40 minutes into a virtual meeting, and stress accumulates after two hours of video calls each day. Yet, people are spending their workdays going from one Zoom meeting to the next. (I'm sure you can relate!)

The shift to distributed teams and hybrid work has resulted in more people experiencing digital burnout, for the following reasons:

- **We've seen an increase in our digital load:** Microsoft users alone sent 40.6 billion more emails in February 2021 than they did in February 2020.
- **We've adopted digital work practices that are incongruent with our biological blueprint:** We're spending our days multi-tasking, triaging our inboxes during virtual meetings and working on three projects at once in different tabs. That simply

doesn't work for our brains and bodies – it's draining our brain and denting our productivity!

- **We have an always-on, busy culture:** This culture dominates most workplaces (and did even before the pandemic). Remote work has heightened this culture and created 'digital presenteeism', where your productivity and performance are superficially gauged by how responsive you are to emails or Teams chats.

As we're reconceptualising new ways of working, now is the time for us to map our growing knowledge of how the brain and body work best in a digital context to the work practices and norms we're embedding. Atlassian's Work Futurist, Dominic Price, suggests that we can't superimpose how we once worked in an office environment over how we work remotely, and that we must find new operational cadences and work practices to suit our new ways of working.

Previous books have identified the issues we're facing; our digital dependency, waning attention spans and quest to be productive online have been extensively explored. While these books have certainly started the conversation and raised awareness of the problems we're confronting, few have provided realistic solutions. We need pragmatic solutions so that we can use technology in ways that support, rather than stifle, our wellbeing and productivity (and don't add to our techno-guilt).

Few of us are oblivious to the issues we're facing with technology, as most of us have lived experience of feeling tethered to our phones, or distracted by the pings and dings; but what we hanker for is positive and attainable solutions. This book will arm you with the tangible strategies and tech habits you can apply to your personal and professional life so you can thrive online.

We cannot outperform our neurobiology. We must create a future of work that's grounded in science and psychology, rather than defaulting to assumptions grounded in outdated, industrialised work practices.

This is a paradigm-shifting moment in time. It's the silver-lining of the pandemic: we can now create ways of working that work *with* our brains and bodies, yielding benefits for us as knowledge workers *and* for the organisations we work for.

That's exactly what this book offers. In it, I share simple, science-backed solutions to your most common digital dilemmas.

I don't propose that you digitally amputate yourself (or even worse, if you're a parent of screenagers, that you propose this to your kids or teens). My solutions don't involve planning a #digitaldetox or going 'laptopless'. Digital minimalism is not a relevant or realistic solution for us knowledge workers. Whether we love it or loathe it, technology is here to stay. It plays a vital role in our lives, so we need to develop sustainable digital habits that make work work for us and our workplaces.

Dear Digital, We need to talk shows you that you're feeling OUSTED because technology has its tentacles in every facet of your life. More importantly, it shows you what you can do to tackle it. I share realistic, research-backed strategies that help you thrive online, and I've compiled a menu of micro-habits that you can easily implement to help you do this.

Now, please don't think that I live in a sort of digital utopia and have tamed *my* tech habits. Even as someone who researches, speaks and writes about digital wellbeing and digital distractions, I'm not immune to the 'digital pull'. I self-medicate with some trashy TV after delivering a keynote. (Please don't judge me, but *Selling Sunset* is my tech temptation.) I scroll social media more than I should, especially when I'm tired. (I'll explain why we do this later in the book.) As I share in this book, I've also experienced digital burnout and come out the other side.

There have been times when my tech habits were out of control. In fact, I was once so digitally distracted, dealing with an avalanche of emails, that I wasn't supervising my son, Billy, who was 15 months' old at the time. As I was frantically triaging my inbox, he sustained a serious facial injury after falling face-first off the lounge, requiring hospitalisation.

Thankfully, Billy made a quick recovery. However, he's been left with a scar on his lip. Still, to this day, I look at that little bulge on his lower right lip and feel riddled with intense guilt. *How could I have been so inept? Shouldn't the digital wellbeing expert have more control over her digital behaviours? Why didn't I just open my inbox, send off the cancellation email and shut the lid? Why is the online world so captivating?*

This incident was the catalyst for me to explore why the digital world has such a strong hold on us. In the years prior, my research and speaking work had centred on how screenagers' use of digital devices was shaping their learning, focus and wellbeing. However, Billy's accident forced me to acknowledge that many adults were just as seduced by their screens as their kids were. As adults, many of us have spent years wagging our fingers at kids and teens and declaring that they're 'addicted' but ignored the fact that we're also glued to our screens. We've attempted to justify our unhealthy digital dependencies under the guise that they're essential for our work. But are they really? Or have our digital habits become problematic?

It's time for us to tame our tech habits and take back control of technology: dear digital, we need to talk.

This book will empower you to make informed decisions about how you use technology so you don't let it control you. It's time for you to thrive online.

I am guessing you've never been more ready for this. Am I right?

Kristy

Introduction

Overload – digital burnout!

My relationship with my phone is, well… complicated. It's a little bit like the relationship I have with my husband: hard to live *with* at times but impossible to live *without* (and it's *always* turned on!).

Remember the good old-fashioned days when we'd go and read information in an encyclopaedia? Or when we'd call someone's secretary (do they even exist anymore?) to organise a meeting? Instead, we can often feel like the living example of the head-exploding emoji. Our brains have not evolved to cope with constant digital onslaught. We're literally drowning in information, in what's colloquially being referred to as 'infobesity'.

In 2011, it was estimated that Americans consumed five times as much information daily as they did in 1986 – that's an estimated equivalent of 174 newspapers *every single day*. A 2009 study suggested that adults were consuming 34.7 gigabytes worth of data every single day during their leisure time, which is more than some of our ancestors would have consumed in a lifetime! More recent estimates suggest that it's more than double that – closer to 74 gigabytes worth of data each day.

While the information coming our way has grown exponentially, our brains have not evolved. Our hippocampus – the brain's memory centre, which I liken to our brain's hard drive – has not increased capacity. We cannot load more RAM onto our hippocampus. To cope with our increased digital load, many of us have reverted to multitasking, working for long periods and having our days peppered with digital distractions. We've adopted digital habits that are completely incongruent with our neurobiology, with how our brains and bodies work best. As a result, many of us are living in a constant state of stress and distraction. If left unresolved, chronic stress can lead to burnout.

The digital superstorm (aka shitstorm)

There are three colliding factors that explain our digital infatuation:

1. Technology has been designed to fulfil our most basic psychological needs.
2. Persuasive design techniques lure us in.
3. Our digital behaviours cause neurobiological changes.

Technology has been designed to fulfil our most basic psychological needs

According to self-determination theory, we have three basic psychological needs: the need to connect, to feel competent and to feel in control. Our psychological driver to connect explains why we love social media and feel like we need to reply to *every* Teams message that comes our way, and why it can be nearly impossible to ignore the 3 p.m. email that lands in our inbox from our boss on a Saturday. We meet our need to feel competent by immediately replying to a colleague's email, and our digital habits give us a sense of control.

Persuasive design techniques lure us in

If you haven't watched *The Social Dilemma*, I encourage you to do so (after you've read this book). This documentary explores some of the persuasive design techniques that social media uses to hook us. For example, we experience the state of insufficiency online – we never feel 'done' or complete – because there are no stopping cues. There's always another message or email, or another refresh of the social media feed we can do.

Many digital technologies have been designed to function like poker machines and offer us intermittent, variable, randomised rewards, which, in turn, activate the reward pathways of the brain. This releases dopamine, the feel-good hormone, driving us to keep checking our devices. This can cause obsessive and dependent behaviours. If we knew that precisely every two hours and 17 minutes we'd receive a wonderful email, we wouldn't keep checking our inboxes intermittently; it's the unpredictable reward ratio that gets us hooked.

The allocation of likes, shares and comments on social media is what has kept so many of us plugged into these platforms. It's been alleged that some social media platforms have deliberately withdrawn social media vanity metrics such as likes and comments based on a user's demographic profile, because giving them a surge of likes and comments conditions them to constantly check the platform.

Our digital behaviours cause neurobiological changes

When you engage in appealing digital tasks, your brain releases dopamine. The striatum, a part of the brain that's integral to your reward system, encourages you to take the most immediate reward. This is why, when faced with the choice between completing complex data analysis or checking email, the striatum will urge you to take the 'easy route' and jump into your inbox. In turn, dopamine hijacks the frontal lobe of the brain (which would otherwise regulate your behaviour), impairing your capacity to manage your impulses. Therefore, getting stuck in Slack or constantly nibbling at emails throughout the day can become a habitual pattern because of the constant digital dopamine dump.

This also explains why we might start off with the intention to eat one square of chocolate, but one can quickly become two, which becomes half the block – because dopamine overrides the logical part of the brain that would regulate behaviour.

Humans engage in a physiological sigh roughly every five minutes: we perform a double inhalation through the nose, followed by an exhalation through the mouth. This is a biological mechanism that helps us regulate our oxygen and carbon dioxide levels and, through this, our stress response. Sighing supports the biological processes required for stability and resetting arousal states. However, when using screens, we tend to sigh much less, indicating that we're usually more stressed when on our devices.

These are just some of the ways our devices are causing neurobiological changes.

What if *we* are not broken?

In recent years, I've had moments when I've hidden in the bathroom and wondered, *why am I the only one who can't handle the stress? What am I doing wrong?*

I've spent countless hours journalling, working with coaches, reading self-help books, listening to podcasts and doing personal development courses to try to resolve this issue. It wasn't until I started chatting more openly with friends and colleagues about *my* struggles with stress (which have led to burnout on more than one occasion) that I realised so many people are currently struggling with an increase in anxiety and overwhelm, and we're all saying the same things to ourselves. We've been suffering in silence – or worse, spending time looking for a new productivity system, app or tech tool to remedy the situation.

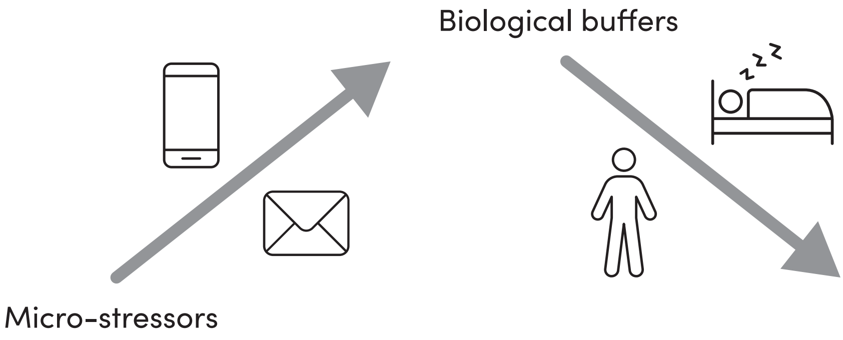
What if we've got it all backwards?

We think *we're* broken or inept. We question whether we're working hard enough, and we're struggling to stay on top of everything: the never-ending emails, WhatsApp and Teams messages, SMS notifications and news alerts, and our ever-growing to-do lists. In our quest to optimise our efficiency and master our time, we turn to tech tools and apps, but they only add to our digital overload.

We blame these perceived failings on a lack of organisation on our part, or a busy period at work, or a bulging inbox.

So many people are doing their best to conceal the fact that they're feeling this way. We keep pushing on in the hope that work will eventually slow down (spoiler alert: it won't), or we'll stop feeling overwhelmed when that big project is complete, or when we get promoted at work, or when we can finally catch up on some sleep. We delude ourselves with future visions of some sort of digital utopia where the Slack notifications stop pinging, the emails don't keep landing and the video calls are few and far between. But this digital utopia doesn't exist, and figure 0.3 illustrates why.

Figure 0.3: Our micro-stressors have increased, and our biological buffers have decreased



Our micro-stressors have increased

More and more people are indicating that they're stressed. In a 2021 survey conducted on behalf of the American Psychological Association, almost a third of respondents said that their stress levels were so high that they sometimes struggled to make basic decisions such as what to eat or wear. Obviously, there is some stress associated with living through a pandemic and global uncertainty, but there are other mechanisms at play that must be contributing to people feeling overwhelmed by day-to-day struggles. I think one of the chief culprits making us stressed is technology.

It's estimated that knowledge workers receive between 9000 and 15,000 emails per year, resulting in them spending around 16 per cent of their working time dealing with their inboxes. We've seen a 252 per cent increase in weekly video meeting times (no wonder so many of us suffer from Zoom fatigue), and we've started to work for longer stretches. Microsoft data suggests that knowledge workers' workdays have expanded by around 46 minutes each day – we're absorbing the commute with work. These behaviours are all micro-stressors. They may seem benign, and each on its own may in fact be harmless. However, they now permeate our days, and they accumulate over time.

We're certainly biologically wired to deal with stress as humans; it's how we've evolved over time. However, we're designed for short bursts of stress, and to close out the stress cycle. Andrew May, founder of StriveStronger, suggests, 'We need stress to help us bend and not break, stretch and not snap'. Yet many of us go from one email, message or Zoom meeting to the next and rarely, if ever, complete the stress cycle. As a result, we're spending most of our days in a busy beta brain (stressed) state and our sympathetic nervous system shifts us into a constant flight, fight or freeze mode to help us handle these micro-stressors.

Our biological buffers have been eroded

At the same time, our digital habits have also displaced some of the biological buffers that were once naturally baked into our days and helped us manage our stress. As a result, many of us feel OUSTED. Technology has altered our sleep, levels of physical movement, connections with others, stress tolerance, exposure to sunlight and even breathing.

A low-resolution version of yourself

In her book *Step Into You*, Lorraine Murphy suggests that people are living as 'low-res' versions of themselves. Many people are experiencing a sense of overwhelm, fatigue and distraction. Lisa Corduff, founder of The Change Room, conducted a study in 2022 with women across the globe and found that 63 per cent of women haven't felt full of energy for at least a year, and 38 per cent can't remember the last time they felt energised. They attributed their low energy to their mental load (75 per cent), stress or worry (71 per cent), lack of sleep (58 per cent) and spending too much time on their phones (45 per cent). Almost half of respondents (49 per cent) indicated that they were spending an average of three to four hours per day on screens on non-work-related activities (and 37 per cent spent one to two hours per day on this), with most indicating that they were spending this time on social media (77 per cent) and chats (7 per cent). We are really becoming slaves to our screens, and this is having a profound impact on our wellbeing.

Ask anyone today how they are and they'll likely answer with one of the two B's: 'busy' or 'burnt out'. In the 2021 Global Workplace Burnout Study, 34.7 per cent of people reported experiencing burnout symptoms. In a 2022 Microsoft report, 48 per cent of global employees and 53 per cent of global managers reported that they were experiencing burnout.

Let me be totally honest with you: I'm not immune to the digital pull. Despite researching, speaking and writing about digital burnout, I'm embarrassed to admit that I've had my experiences with burnout – times when I have pushed myself beyond the point of exhaustion. In fact, there were times when I was so exhausted that I had seizures. Along the way, I ticked all the boxes for burnout symptoms, but I chose to ignore them and kept pushing on until my body physiologically shut down.

Burnout led to me becoming a low-resolution version of myself. I was constantly exhausted, agitated and overwhelmed. I was brittle and frayed around the edges. No productivity system, no culling of my to-do list and no email management system could fix the problem – it was bigger than that. However, at the time, I couldn't see the wood from the trees. I was bogged in burnout.

As we experience burnout, our ability to handle additional stress reduces, and our cognitive and executive function can be compromised, along with a host of other serious physical and psychological consequences. I literally became oblivious to the fact that I was burnt out. My digital load increased exponentially, I started working in ways that were completely incongruent with my biology (even though I should have known better), and I felt trapped in the always-on, busy societal norm I'd bought into (and, I'm ashamed to say, I was perpetuating). The burnout symptoms were certainly there, but I chose to ignore them and push through.

Check to see if the World Health Organization's criteria for burnout are present in your own life:

- **Exhaustion:** Chronic sleep issues, digestive issues, a drop in libido, hair loss, and feeling short-tempered and teary over insignificant things are common symptoms of exhaustion. Burnout is characterised by physical and psychological depletion or exhaustion.

- **Cynicism:** Struggling to find your motivation, withdrawing from social activities, losing idealism, feeling irritable, feeling negative towards colleagues or clients, and feeling sceptical about your work can be red flags that cynicism has set in.
- **Reduced professional efficacy:** Has your productivity tanked? Do you feel less accomplished or capable than previously? Are you suffering from low morale and an inability to cope? These can all be signals of reduced efficacy.

(If you're curious about your actual risk of digital burnout, there is a free Digital Burnout Barometer assessment tool available in the 'Book Resources' section of my website.)

If you're struggling from burnout, or have previously, I want you to know that you're not broken or fundamentally flawed. You're not 'addicted'. You're not inefficient. And, no, you don't need a new productivity system or tech tool to remedy the situation!

You're not alone, and your burnout can be an opportunity for growth. Your agitated state can be an opportunity for you to find better, more sustainable ways of working and digital habits that are aligned with your neurobiology.

The solution isn't as simple as going on a #digitaldetox. (Spoiler alert: they don't work, because they don't result in long-term behavioural change.) It isn't to switch off completely for long periods of time because, let's face it, that doesn't last – and, for many of us, it isn't an option at all!

Instead, what we need to do is to find sustainable and healthy ways to integrate technology into our lives. We need to use our human operating system (hOS) to guide how we use technology.

As knowledge workers, we've been following a playbook that's outdated. Put simply, we've been working in ways that *don't* work for us. We need a new playbook that's based on the science of how our brains and bodies work best, and how they operate effectively in an online context. In her book *The Invisible Load*, Dr Libby Weaver suggests that we can turn down the volume on our overwhelm by better management of our digital devices. Now, as we are redefining our ways of working, is the chance for us to create ways of working that work for us as humans by aligning our digital behaviours to our hOS. We need to go back to our biology, look at what we humans need for optimal performance and map that to our digital ways of working and living.

It's time to find a digital operating system that leaves you feeling like a high-resolution version of yourself.

Upgrade your hOS

Burnout forced me to re-examine the ways in which I worked and question the world at large – why are we all buying into the 'busy' culture? Burnout was my soul screaming, 'Kristy, there's got to be a better way!' It was an invitation for me to evolve, adapt and change; it was an opportunity to work in a different way. I needed a different operating system. So I set out to test, refine and implement new ways of working based on how our brains and bodies work best online, on our hOS.

I've read, researched and (most importantly) applied a range of micro-habits to my life to tame my digital behaviours. I've made sure that the digital dimensions of my life work *with* my neurobiology, rather than *against* it – I've learned to control technology so it doesn't control me! I've put an end to feeling digitally distracted, dependent and disconnected. I've stopped feeling OUSTED.

Burnout was my catalyst for change, and significant change at that. I overhauled my unhealthy digital habits. I studied and implemented what our brains and bodies need for peak performance. And it changed my life.

We're at a critical juncture. As we redefine how, where and when we work in the wake of the pandemic, and as people are starting to examine the effects of the widespread adoption of digital technologies – for example, 'Facebook fatigue' – the time has come for us to examine critically our (sometimes complicated) relationships with technology.

While there's much conversation around 'flexible work arrangements' I believe the real opportunity lies in creating 'productive work arrangements', and the only way we can do this is by creating more sustainable digital habits that don't erode our wellbeing or dent our productivity. This is a paradigm-shifting moment, when we can structure our workdays to work *for* us and meet our neurobiological needs. It's time for us to abandon outdated modes of working, such as endless meetings, the normalisation of work on weekends or outside defined work hours, and constant multi-tasking.

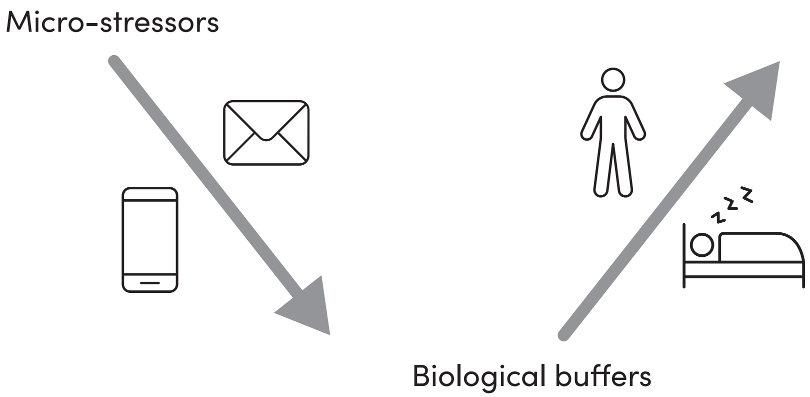
Sure, we certainly can (and should, to some extent) blame the technology companies for their persuasive design techniques that got us (and our screenagers) hooked on our devices. However, we need to stop abdicating responsibility for our digital behaviours and instead focus on the things that we *can* do to tame our tech habits.

Instead, we need to cultivate digital practices that work *with* rather than *against* our brains and bodies. There are basic practices that we can implement to offset our digital demands.

We have an opportunity for us to better map our digital habits to our hOS. We must start to use digital technologies, both professionally and personally, to meet our most fundamental human needs. We are not machines. We cannot outperform our biological blueprint. We need to use our phones, laptops, tablets and other devices in ways that are congruent with our biology.

So, how can you upgrade your hOS? Don't fear, I won't propose that you cancel your Netflix subscription, aim for 'inbox zero' or go on a #digitaldetox. Instead, I'd like to empower you to put an end to feeling OUSTED and reverse the digital equation (as shown in figure 0.4).

Figure 0.4: Reduce your micro-stressors and increase your biological buffers



Reduce your micro-stressors

If we want to optimise our performance and protect our wellbeing in the digital world, we must reduce the micro-stressors that now permeate our days. While they may seem insignificant, and we don't typically stop to ponder how they're affecting us, micro-stressors can accumulate over time and impact us:

- **Alerts and notifications:** Alerts and notifications are some of the chief micro-stressors in our digitally dominated days. Our brains cannot differentiate between a tiger chasing us and a TikTok notification: both are perceived as a threat and subsequent stressor. Your brain sees the red notification bubble in your inbox declaring that you have 108 unread emails as a stressor – let's start by getting rid of that!

- **Work hours:** Research tells us that peak performance requires cycles of rest and recovery. We're biologically incapable of working for long stretches of time without periods of rest. Working longer hours doesn't lead to higher impact; in fact, working long hours can impair performance. The prefrontal cortex – the part of our brain that helps with problem-solving, complex thinking and working memory – is prone to fatigue. It only has a maximum battery life of approximately six hours per day (not 12 hours, as many of us try to do). We cannot expect that we can work for continuous stretches of time without adequate rest periods; that's working against our biology.
- **Working without breaks:** We need to create workplace cultures in which taking breaks is revered, not feared. Wellbeing isn't a set of slogans, a one-off lunch-and-learn workshop or token wellbeing days; it's best practices and norms informed by evidence and scientific rigour. Microsoft studies involving brain scans showed that stress levels drop dramatically if you simply take a ten-minute break between Teams meetings.
- **Zoom fatigue:** Videoconferencing closely resembles having a conversation with someone just 60 centimetres away from you. American anthropologist Edward Hall describes this distance as the 'intimate distance', typically reserved for telling secrets, cuddling, lovemaking, comforting, protecting, and playing football or wrestling. We reserve this distance for our loved ones or close friends… or, if really necessary, our enemies in a physical fight. It's the distance of mating or conflict – yet we're just on a Zoom call with Greg from accounts! Our brain can interpret this as a threat and, in turn, release cortisol (the stress hormone). There is a host of other reasons video calls are mentally fatiguing; I'll explain these in more detail later and, more importantly, arm you with brain-based strategies to tackle them.

- **Multi-tasking:** Multi-tasking, which has become a norm in our distributed workplaces, stresses the brain. Many of us now sit in Zoom meetings while also triaging our inboxes. When we multi-task, our brain burns through glucose – the brain's energy supply – and releases cortisol. Think of how frequently you multi-task, and consider the stress this is placing on your brain and body.
- **Always-on culture:** Our always-on culture has left many people feeling as if they can never switch off and take a psychological break from their work. The prevalence of communication tools such as Slack, Teams, WhatsApp and messages is causing 'availability creep' – the idea that many of us feel we need to be responsive at all hours. We need to establish digital guardrails – accepted digital norms, practices and principles that underpin how technology is used in organisations. How quickly does your team expect a Teams chat reply? Do you need to reply to your boss's emails at 11 p.m.?
- **Social stressors:** We're being exposed to more graphic content on a daily basis via social media and news sites. In years gone by, natural disasters, mass shootings and tragic accidents were certainly reported by the media, but these reports did not contain the raw video footage we now see that clearly shows horrific details. At best, in the past, a photo or written description of the incident was provided. Consuming a myriad of videos and social media posts about a tragic event is stressful – and this is how many of us start our days!

The good news is that there are digital habits that can eradicate many of the stressors that once derailed your day.

Increase your biological buffers

You cannot just reduce the micro-stressors in your life and expect that your stressful days will disappear – that won't be the case. In addition, you must fiercely protect some of the most basic biological needs that help you regulate your stress response.

When we work against our biology, it's like putting the wrong fuel in a Porsche and expecting it to go fast. What we need to do is prioritise the potent. We must embed the habits that help us manage stress (and also help us to focus):

- **Human connection:** One of our most fundamental needs is the need for relational connection. When we're with other people, we often laugh with them or imitate their mood and can co-regulate, thanks to our mirror neurons. (There's science to suggest that, yes, moods can be contagious.) Connecting with others, especially in person, can be an antidote to stress. When we're with other people, our brain releases oxytocin, which strengthens our bonds with others and reduces our stress and anxiety. Unfortunately, online interactions do not biochemically replicate in-person connections. In fact, research has shown that in-person interactions are far superior for reducing cortisol levels and enhancing oxytocin, compared with text-only and verbal-only interactions.
- **Sleep:** Research confirms that 20 per cent of Australians are woken up each night by alerts and notifications. Interrupted sleep means that people aren't completing their sleep cycles. A tired brain is ill-equipped to manage stress, because the prefrontal cortex doesn't work effectively; instead, the amygdala (the emotional hub of the brain) fires up. This is why we binge-watch TV, spend hours scrolling social media and make poorer food choices when we're tired. So, we need to protect the quantity and quality of our sleep.
- **Physical movement:** Humans are biologically designed to be active, not sit in front of a screen for hours at a time. Movement activates a range of neurotransmitters that make us feel good (such as dopamine, serotonin and noradrenaline) and help us to focus. Research also confirms that forward ambulation (for example, walking or running) activates dopamine and neuromodulators

that put the brain in an alert, focused state. Also, when we move, we create optic flow – this is the actual movement of objects passing us as we move, and it quietens the circuits that are responsible for stress. Have you ever found that you can solve a problem or feel far less stressed after a walk? Now you know why.

- **Sunlight:** Sunlight exposure can offset myopia (nearsightedness) and help reset our circadian rhythm, which supports sleep, and in doing so reduces stress, elevates mood and increases alertness. We need to ensure that our eyes are exposed to sunlight soon after waking (within 30 to 60 minutes is suggested); this controls the release of cortisol and melatonin, which impact sleep and mood. Sunlight also increases the brain's release of serotonin, a mood-boosting hormone that can help us feel calm and alert. While there aren't specific recommendations for adults, for children and teenagers at least 90 minutes of outdoor activity per day is advised.
- **Breathing:** We breathe differently when using devices. For example, we sigh significantly less when using screens. As mentioned earlier, sighing occurs roughly every five minutes and is our body's way of regulating the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in our bodies. Sighing is a pattern of breathing that occurs spontaneously in sleep and when our carbon dioxide levels get too high, but we can also deliberately sigh to reduce our stress or anxiety levels quickly.
- **Stress tolerance:** Thanks to technological advancements, we rarely (if ever) feel cold or hot. As Paul Taylor explains in his book *Death by Comfort*, we live very comfortable lives thanks to our modern-day conveniences, such as air-conditioning and heating. Our bodies have become accustomed to being comfortable. But remember, our brains and bodies need stress; tolerable amounts of stress can nudge us to take action by heightening our focus and energy, and can be healthy for us.

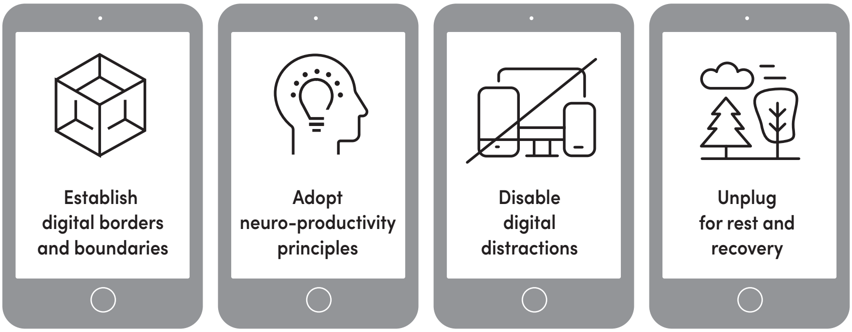
Time to upgrade!

There are realistic, research-based actions we can take to ensure our digital behaviours don't erode or diminish our basic biological needs.

In the following sections of this book, I arm you with practices (and their accompanying micro-habits) that you can implement to ensure you reduce the micro-stressors in your life, and bolster the biological buffers that cushion you from stress so that you can flourish in this busy, always-on, digital world.

There are four pillars of digital peak performance that can help you thrive in the digital world, as shown in figure 0.5.

Figure 0.5: The four pillars of digital peak performance


Establish digital borders and boundaries
Adopt neuro-productivity principles
Disable digital distractions
Unplug for rest and recovery

Each of the pillars contains three practices, and each practice involves three micro-habits that you can adopt to thrive in the digital age.

Making these small digital adjustments doesn't have to be complicated or convoluted. The basics work – if you work the basics. There are bedrock habits you can easily adopt that will transform your digital life and raise your stress threshold.

It's time for you to tame your tech habits and thrive in a distracted world.