

# Unplugged

[un·plugg·ed] verb

Refers to taking a break from using electronic devices such as smartphones, computers, and televisions.

It involves intentionally disconnecting from the internet and digital communication platforms to reduce screen time and promote a healthier balance between technology use and other activities.

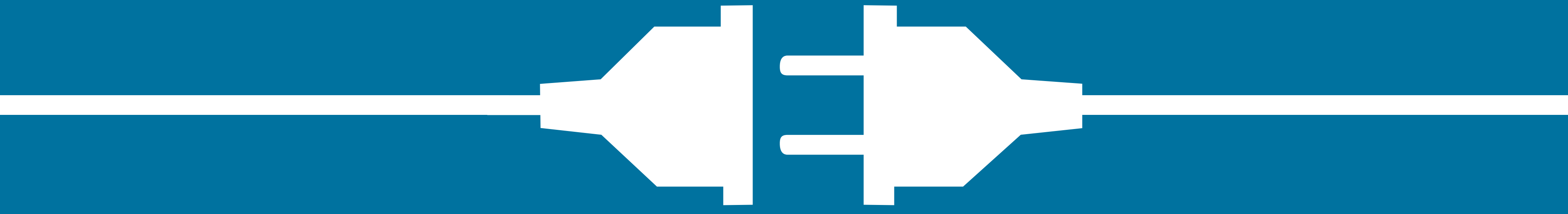


A Guide to  
Disconnecting  
from Technology



Written By:

**Eric D. Garcia**



# Unplugged

Eric D. Garcia

**In today's world, we are constantly connected to our devices, and breaking away from the endless stream of digital noise can be difficult.**

This e-book covers everything from the basics of unplugging to my personal experiences with the practice since 2013 and the stories of others who have tried it. This e-book will give you insight into ways to disconnect from technology, find balance, and live a more mindful and present life.

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# About the Author



## Eric D. Garcia

When it comes to helping veterinary practices streamline their technology and attract and retain clients, Eric Garcia has a proven track record of educating the industry and producing results. Eric is an internationally recognized IT and Digital Strategist working within the field of veterinary medicine. Garcia's work has been recognized throughout the industry. Eric was voted VMX 2020 Speaker of the Year by conference attendees. He speaks regularly at conferences all throughout the world.



# Table of Contents

**06** How to Master the Double-Edged Sword of Constant Connectivity

---

**10** How a Self-Professed Tech Addict Finally Unplugged (*and learned to like it*)

---

**16** Go Ahead, Steal the Moment

---

**20** You Make Your Own Rules

---

**24** Your Stories

---

**37** Power Down – Your Stories Part II

---

**44** Disconnecting to Connect Again

---

**50** Embracing Boredom

---

**57** Finding Balance and Reaping the Benefits

---

**65** Epilogue

# What is Unplugging?

**UNPLUGGING:** *verb*; typically refers to taking a break from using electronic devices such as smartphones, computers, and televisions. It involves intentionally disconnecting from the internet and digital communication platforms to reduce screen time and promote a healthier balance between technology use and other activities.

# 1

## How to Master the Double-Edged Sword of Constant Connectivity

By the ripe age of twenty, I was strapped in as the VP of a competitive veterinary marketing firm. At twenty-three, I had launched my own firm entirely: Simply Done Tech Solutions. By clueing in early to the necessity of digital adaptation, I was able to arm myself with the best technology, and instruct industry peers, firms, veterinary practices and friends how to do the same. Keeping a leg up in our world means having a finger on the pulse and an eye on the next step at the very same time. However, it's this same constant connectivity that can take a hazardous toll on attention spans, peace of mind, and ultimately cause some nasty burnout along the way. So how do we leverage technology, but do so with intention? How can we maintain our status as technological savants at Simply Done Tech Solutions and maximize our efficiency, yet still remain cool, calm and collected? **I'll give proven tips on how to instantly maximize your effectiveness, while making sure you stay master of your digital tools, rather than the other way around.**

Nowadays, we can get more done in twenty-four hours than we once would have ever thought possible. If your iPhone alarm clock rings at 5:30AM, you can pop on your automated coffee maker by 5:45AM, take the dogs out for a quick walk, and be finished replying to emails by the time you crack into work at 8:00. At this rate, you might even be able to finish the never-ending stack of callbacks you've been working on by 2:30PM, and still have time to order Chipotle from your iPad for a late yet impossibly convenient lunch.

There's only one problem here. You might just be moving so fast that you can hardly taste your lunch or even slow down by the time you get to dinner! The frenetic lifestyle brought on by instantaneous Internet access may put us ahead by leaps and bounds when it comes to doing our work, but it can also wind us up and throw us into a myriad maze of never-ending tasks. This leaves us at odds, somehow increasing our efficiency but somewhat dissatisfied and always striving to do even more. Many of us wind up multi-tasking to increase our efficiency still, responding to texts in-between emails and trying to catch up on an interesting [Huffington Post article](#) with the leftover minutes before our next appointment.

A study published by Stanford has compiled some intriguing data on the effects of multitasking. I encourage you to read the report in full, but the summary is this: when you commit to too many things at once, you suffer, and the work suffers. Although we've gotten accustomed to doing more, we can't do it as well or give it our complete full attention. Imagine trying to watch ten television sets at the same time. Now how much dialogue and plot can you really remember at the end of thirty minutes?

Ok, so what do we do about all of this? How do we increase efficiency while still avoiding burnout and internet-fatigue? Simple. Just unplug. As hinted by the title of this chapter, you can have the best of both worlds, and I'll teach you how. Designate some time each year to regroup and get away from it all. Yes, that includes Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. You don't have to deactivate entirely, but log out and take a long and intentional break. Maybe even change your passwords to something that can't be input with muscle memory. Prepare in advance, pay bills early and set up auto-responders for your important email accounts. When done correctly, you can unplug for as little as a week, but as much as a month, without losing any headway on your projects or work. In fact, you might even find that

when you come back from your digital sabbatical, you're feeling better than ever. For me personally, a bit of time to unplug from the world allows me to prioritize friends, family and myself. I find myself gaining a heightened sense of creativity and an eagerness to put my ideas into action when I get back to work.

**Want some help getting started?** Here are some tips that can help you kick things off when you're ready to try your first official #Unplugged session.

## How to #Unplug in 5 Simple Steps

### STEP 1: Schedule Time Away

You don't need to go far. Or you can go as far as you like. The point is, get out of the routine you're in and find somewhere peaceful where you can achieve stillness and quiet. This could be a beach; it also could be a family or friends house. Find somewhere you've been meaning to spend time, and go!

### STEP 2: Alert Important Contacts of Your Plan

Before you go, you'll need to prepare. Inform your staff, your colleagues and friends of your plan to unplug. Make sure to prepare by wrapping up your current projects and sending a definitive message to those who should know.

### STEP 3: Set Up Your Auto-Responder via Email

Be thorough yet clear. Let people know you'll be away and for how long. My away message looks a little something like this;

*(It was inspired by Fast Company):*



**PLEASE NOTE:** I will be taking a digital sabbatical from June 25 – July 9. I will be completely #Unplugged from the world. During this time, I will not be able to generate any activity through phone, email, or any social network, including but not limited to glancing, checking, syncing, Wi-Fi connecting, pinning, sharing, Google-ing, commenting, liking, loving, angering, Facebook live-ing, tagging, favoriting, plus-one-ing, tweeting, snap chatting, Instagram-ing, messaging, TikTok-ing, texting, Facetiming (*unless it's my mom to check in on my dogs*) or uploading.

I include this same message in my email signature for 1-2 months before I leave. Just to give people an ample amount of notice.

## **STEP 4: Establish Emergency Contacts**

I recommend letting family and a few select friends know how to contact you in case of an emergency. You may have a landline connected where you're staying, or a cell-phone that is disconnected from Social Media accounts and kept on silent. Even if you're only gone for a little while, it's important that you can be contacted if something important comes up.

## **STEP 5: Unplug and Smile!**

It has begun, you're officially #Unplugged! Pay close attention to the sights, the sounds and the sensations around you. When you come back, you'll be refreshed, recharged and ready to give 110% to exactly what matters most. I promise.

## 2

### **How a Self-Professed Tech Addict Finally Unplugged** *(and learned to like it)*

**Hi. I'm Eric, and I'm a wee bit addicted to tech and communications.** The Eric who delivered this introduction/confession during a Fetch session is Eric Garcia, a veterinary IT and digital marketing consultant. In spite of *(or more accurately, because of)* Garcia's self-professed addiction, he takes a yearly 14-day digital sabbatical. That's right—two straight weeks without a phone or internet access. Whether this sounds like heaven or hell, possible or impossible, he wants you to join him.

#### **A Lightbulb Moment in the City of Lights:**

For Garcia, the realization that he needed to unplug from technology came during a trip to Paris. Surrounded by cafes, culture and companionship, Garcia stopped to “quickly” check his work email and peruse Facebook—and didn't look up for the next three and a half hours. Worse still, the annoyances and burdens he'd seen while scrolling stayed in his thoughts long after. So Garcia asked himself some painfully honest questions in order to understand why he felt he couldn't disconnect. The exercise revealed the beliefs that kept him glued to his phone and computer.

- “I'm important and people need me.”
- “No one can do what I do.”
- “People will get upset if I take a vacation.”
- “Taking a break isn't worth the mound of work I'll face when I return.”
- “I'm fine! I love working!”

Garcia wanted to prove these beliefs were wrong, so when he read a [2013 Fast Company article](#) about taking an extended digital sabbatical, he accepted the challenge.

## **Tapping Into What It Feels Like to Unplug:**

Garcia developed a set of straightforward rules for his 14-day sabbatical. His phone: **off**. Computer and tablet: **off**. Social media, email and online news: **off limits**. For the first 48 hours, Garcia was insatiably curious about what he was missing. He also experienced FOMO, or fear of missing out. His mind swirled. *“What drama am I missing on social media? What is everyone doing at work?”* But after a couple of days, the desire to take a peek at his phone subsided and he no longer pondered what he was missing. *“At that point,”* Garcia says, *“I felt free—like my phone and my work weren’t running my life anymore.”* Though he normally takes melatonin in order to sleep at night, Garcia was able to snooze without aids. He also saw his relationships improve and deepen during the sabbatical. *“By the end of it, I didn’t want to turn my phone back on,”* Garcia admits. *“I felt like a completely different person.”*

Garcia’s experience has been validated by scientific research. According to a [2012 study from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute](#), spending two hours in front of backlit devices such as iPads and computers can suppress melatonin by about 22 percent and delay sleep. Another [study from the University of Essex](#) found evidence that the mere presence of a mobile phone (*even if not being used*) can negatively affect *“closeness, connection and conversation quality.”* Switching the devices off, then, would bring about the kinds of positive results Garcia noticed. Back at work, Garcia discovered that he was more productive and had a better attitude. Case in point? *“I was energized and ready to start answering emails!”* he says, laughing. *“My thoughts and conversations became more clear.”*

*I had new ideas and was excited to bring them to life.”*

## **Sharing is Caring:**

**Myth:** Unplugging only works if you hate your job You don't have to dislike your job or hate working to benefit from unplugging, Garcia says. *“People will argue with me, ‘If I love what I do, why does it matter if I’m constantly connected?’ Then they unplug, see the difference and the argument ends.”*

Garcia wasn't content to keep this newfound perspective to himself and began bringing his *“unplugged”* message to veterinary professionals at Fetch.” He explains, *“Constantly being connected is exhausting and distracting and can keep us from forming deeper relationships. In a profession that’s already prone to burnout, veterinary professionals are especially vulnerable. And in this digital age, things are poised to get worse. I’m not a wellness expert, but I know how unplugging has improved my quality of life.”* When asked if veterinarians can really unplug, Garcia didn't mince his words: *“The real question is whether or not veterinarians can go without unplugging.”*

He admits that it's easier if you have a team of associates to rely on but maintains that it's possible regardless. *“If you're a solo veterinarian, be open to allowing a colleague from another local practice care for your patients in your absence with an understanding that the patient will remain with your practice after the break,”* he says. *“Then, you can return the favor. Letting go is the hardest part, but veterinarians must accept that there are others who can do what they do.”*

## Unplugged Moments

Unplugging isn't one-size-fits all, but if you want to follow in Garcia's footsteps, he has some advice to ease you in. *"Begin by spending a day without your phone,"* Garcia suggests. *"Then, try a day without social media or stop answering emails after 5 p.m."*

**Hide your apps!:** We are creatures of habit. *"I can't count how many times I've caught myself pulling out my phone to check Instagram or my email during an unplugged moment while in the Starbucks drive-thru or waiting in line at the grocery store without thinking,"* Garcia admits. *"To combat this, I move my most-used apps to another screen during unplugged moments so I'm able to catch myself before I start scrolling."*

Less intense than a full-blown digital sabbatical, these *"unplugged moments"* can range from a few hours to an entire weekend. *"You can cut out as much or as little during this time as you want,"* Garcia says, *"but I usually go without my phone, email and social media."* Garcia lists telltale signs that he's in need of an unplugged moment: *"If I become easily agitated and get upset when my phone dings because it's another email to get back to, or if I've been working nonstop for several days (including in my bed at night) and can't focus, I know it's time for a reset. Over time, I've tried to become proactive about it and schedule unplugged moments right before particularly hectic periods."*

## Tips for a Better (and Safer) Sabbatical:

When you're ready for a longer stretch of going unplugged, like the two-week digital sabbatical Garcia takes every summer, don't simply disappear without a trace. While speaking at a conference, Garcia met a veterinarian who had already taken a digital sabbatical with heartbreaking results. *"She said that when she plugged back in and checked Facebook, she saw a message from a client who was*

*seeking emergency medical services. The client waited for the veterinarian to respond and did not seek help elsewhere. The pet died as a result and the veterinarian is now weighed down with guilt,” Garcia says.*

Though he admits that the pet owner was wrong to contact the veterinarian via social media and should have sought outside assistance, Garcia has developed the following tips for smooth, safe sabbaticals:

Notify important work contacts. *“A month or two before your scheduled time away, start notifying important contacts of your plans,”* Garcia says. At work, this means adding a paragraph to the bottom of every email. He offers the following example:

**PLEASE NOTE:** I will be taking a digital sabbatical from June 25 – July 9. I will be completely #Unplugged from the world. During this time, I will not be able to generate any activity through phone, email, or any social network, including but not limited to glancing, checking, syncing, Wi-Fi connecting, pinning, sharing, Google-ing, commenting, liking, loving, angering, Facebook live-ing, tagging, favoriting, plus-one-ing, tweeting, snap chatting, Instagram-ing, messaging, TikTok-ing, texting, Facetiming (*unless it’s my mom to check in on my dogs*) or uploading.

Pick emergency contacts. The next step is to establish emergency contacts. *“Let some family and friends know how to contact you in case of an emergency,”* Garcia recommends. *“This could be on a landline or on a cell phone that is disconnected from the internet and kept silent.”*

Set up your email to automatically respond. Right before you leave, set up an automatic email response with the name and number of a clinic to contact in case of emergency. You can do this on Facebook and on your voicemail as well. Again, he offers an example:

Dear Colleagues, Clients and Friends:

I will be taking a digital sabbatical from June 25 – July 9. I will be completely #Unplugged from the world. During this time, I will not be able to generate any activity through phone, email, or any social network, including but not limited to glancing, checking, syncing, Wi-Fi connecting, pinning, sharing, Google-ing, commenting, liking, loving, angering, Facebook live-ing, tagging, favoriting, plus-one-ing, tweeting, snap chatting, Instagram-ing, messaging, TikTok-ing, texting, Facetiming (*unless it's my mom to check in on my dogs*) or uploading.

Why do I take a digital sabbatical? Learn more at [simplydonetechsolutions.com/unplugged](https://simplydonetechsolutions.com/unplugged).

If you require assistance before I return, please contact my colleague Dr. John Jones at (417) 555-1212 or [drjohn@vet.com](mailto:drjohn@vet.com). If this is an emergency, please call Nextdoor Animal Hospital at (417) 555-2323.

I look forward to replying to all of your emails, phone calls, text messages and social conversations when I get back. Thank you all for your understanding!

**Now what? According to Garcia, “*Now you unplug and smile.*”**

# 3

## Go Ahead, Steal the Moment: Unplugged Moments

We've all been there before. Maybe you promise yourself that this is the last email of the night or that you won't be logging back into social media until it's really important. Whether it's for work or play, we find more and more that it's all too easy to be consumed in the digital world around us. Sure, new advents like smartphones have boosted productivity and given us a convenience never before possible. The world is literally at our fingertips, and that level of seamless tech integration into our daily lives is nothing short of miraculous. **Still, if we start to spend more time in that world than we do in our own physical, that's when we start to run into problems.**

Work might start to lack the same meaning it once had, and even important relationships might start to feel ordinary and unengaging. What's hardest to pinpoint (*and often eludes even people*) is **distinguishing when the use of technology is actually being used for more harm or good.** The reality is, the world of non-stop news and ongoing social media activity creates a constant noise; a buzz that serves as an undercurrent to world events and social interactions at every level. This type of noise, compounded over time, can start to exhaust us and wear our energy down to the point of total burnout, while creating a level of stress that can actually be detrimental to overall health. Stress is linked to a variety of severe conditions, from heart disease to asthma, depression, accelerated aging and more. When stress inhibits your sleep (*like it used to impede mine and from time to time still does*) this can damage your body's ability



to recharge, heal, build antibodies and perform optimally. This can eventually lead to an increased likelihood of developing dementia and even Alzheimer's. (Side note: Arianna Huffington's book "[The Sleep Revolution](#)" will scare you into getting more sleep.)

So, it's important to be mindful, and even vigilant, of the power that technology wields. **Even though new technology is an incredible thing, it can actually catalyze a great deal of harm when misused.** That's why it's more important now than ever, to consider the benefits of carving time away from technology and understanding the rewards that this sort of practice can yield. In past chapters, I have shared tips for an extended unplug, which can last two weeks (*or more*) and promotes a total disconnect from your smartphone or other technology you typically engage with frequently.

In this chapter, I'll share tips for **#UnpluggedMoments**, which instead allows you to carve out the time you need to recharge, anywhere and anyhow you see fit! This can be particularly empowering if you don't have the time or resources to take an extended getaway or leave your home for a full-on vacation. Instead, these moments are there whenever you choose to seize them. It can be an afternoon spent in the park with your phone on silent, or taking a few hours in the morning for breakfast and exercise before turning your phone on. These moments can help to hold you over during particularly stressful times, and you can get better at identifying when they'll be most beneficial over time. For example, if you've started to lose sleep over work, are especially agitated or otherwise anxious, it may be the perfect time for your next **#UnpluggedMoment. SO, GO AHEAD AND STEAL THE MOMENT!**

These tips will help you to make the most of the unplugged moment that's right in front of you:

- **Decide what rules are right for your unplugged moment:**

On my unplugged moments, I prohibit phone calls, text, email and social media. If there's an exception to the rule (*like an emergency phone contact, which I do recommend*) make a note of it and follow accordingly.

- **Decide what you want most out of the experience:**

If you've been feeling distant from a friend or family member, you may decide to invite them to a dinner where you both leave your phones at home. You may just find that your interactions are more focused and meaningful without the extra distraction. If they're confused about why leaving their phone behind is important – you might want to share this article with them.

- **Stay a step ahead...of yourself. If you've decided to unplug for the weekend, try turning your home computer off:** Maybe even take the chord out of the wall (*a literal unplug gets extra points*). Out of sheer habit, you may head over to the computer to turn it on, but by making sure it's actually disconnected from the power, it will stay off and serve as a buffer against your muscle memory.

- **The same goes for smartphones:** I move all of my most impulsive apps to a less accessible screen, so that if I get the sudden urge to open Facebook out of impulse, the icon isn't where I usually find it. This serves as a reminder to myself, *"I've hid my apps for a reason."*

- **Get creative:** It can be tempting to wait to unplug, searching for the perfect vacation or sometime in the future when everything aligns just right. Those extended moments can be hard to come by, so plan an hour, or a day, depending on what's best for you and realistic. You can

decide to walk to a new part of town with your phone turned off, so you can enjoy a lunch or coffee in peace and quiet. You might spend a whole weekend camping, which is also an amazing way to connect with the world around you, without depending on technology.

When you unplug properly, whether for a moment or for a month, you find that something incredible happens. Not only do your senses come alive (*food tastes richer, colors are more vivid*), but your sense of curiosity and joy starts to grow too. Life is no longer about getting back to work, but it's instead about loving what you're doing, whatever that may be at the moment.

# 4

## You Make Your Own Rules

You might be wondering, “*Eric, why is this topic so important to you?*” To answer that question, let’s backtrack for just a moment. I’d like to share a quick story about my good friend. During one of my #Unplugged trips several years ago, I was fortunate enough to visit Machu Picchu in Peru. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and something I was extremely excited about. During the entire vacation, I decided to unplug. This means that although I had access to a phone for emergencies, I wasn’t scrolling through social media, answering emails on the go, texting, pinging, etc. I was in the moment. I wanted to focus on every little experience during my trip and had a feeling I’d learn more and feel more connected to my experience by doing so.

The hike to Machu Picchu (*not for the faint of heart, mind you*) was a grueling journey involving intensive concentration and plenty of sweating. But when I finally laid eyes on the mountain peaks and valleys, I was in absolute awe. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing; in fact, the scene was so vivid it felt a bit surreal. Photos, however stunning, don’t do it justice. I walked around a bit and finally decided to sit down and take it all in. I sat for about an hour, staring at my surroundings and letting it all sink in. But my friend? He was exploring every nook of the mountain by furiously snapping photos left and right, switching between his cell phone and Sony camera. Later in the evening, we started to share stories of our experience and what it all felt like. My friend turned to me, and surprisingly he said, “*You know, I don’t feel like I was really there. I was so busy taking photos that I didn’t get to enjoy it.*” At that moment, it hit me. And I told him.

*“It sounds like you were looking for a post-able moment, instead of being in the moment.”*

We all know about the “*post-able*” moment. Taking as many pictures as we need to get that perfect shot we can tag on social media and rack up the most likes. This becomes an odd type of pursuit, where being perceived as happy and successful in our travels, becomes more important than actually being those things. But I didn’t share this same regret with my friend. I felt like I was able to deeply enjoy my experience. Of course, I remember plenty of moments before this trip where I decided intentionally to unplug (*and yes, even still today*) that I was guilty of this too: snapping that perfect photo but being too distracted or plugged in to resonate more deeply within the moment. We’re not perfect, and this is bound to happen, but it’s actually possible to make this the exception and not the rule.

This topic has actually become more important each time that I’ve written about it. **A study found that Millennials check their phones 150 times per day** (*I’m one of them!*), a number that may surprise some but could even feel predictable to others. However, it’s not just my generation. Generation X is even worse! **“Research by Nielsen**, *found that Americans aged 35 to 49 used social media 40 minutes more each week than those aged 18 to 34. Gen Xers were also more likely than millennials to pull their phones out at the dinner table.*” Technology is becoming more entrenched into our daily lives in powerful ways, and we’ve got to take on the responsibility and consequences that come along with it.

The most important takeaway in this chapter is that for the #Unplugged experience to be worthwhile to you, you’ve got to make it your own. Sure, I love to provide examples and tips to friends and clients, but this is because I’ve learned what works best for me.

For example, I have a friend who checks Twitter even during his “#Unplugged vacations”. This used to surprise me, and I would tell him, “Well, you’re not really unplugged if you’re on Twitter!” But he let me know that his unplugging involves no Facebook, calls, or texts. He finds Twitter to be enjoyable and relaxing, so he’s made an exception to the “rules” that I adhere to. I encourage this! Making your own rules is the theme here, and it actually will lead to a more satisfying and holistic unplugged experience for you. Another friend says “yes” to her specific Social Media networks but does not check email or texts from work. This is enough for her and allows her to enjoy her experience. Again, the takeaway is that making your own rules can provide a more realistic and ultimately satisfying experience. While I still consider a fully #Unplugged vacation or sabbatical to involve unplugging from all technology, you should set your own rules to benefit your experience.

There’s no #UnpluggedPolice that will sound the alarm if you start playing Wordle or posting. But still, you should remain mindful of what exceptions you’ve granted for yourself and why. Ironically enough, there are some specific apps that can actually help you to unplug and enhance everyday wellness. For example, the **Calm** app gives you daily reminders and activities to help you de-stress, declutter and stay mindful. The Calm app is a popular mindfulness and wellness application designed to assist users in achieving better sleep, meditation, and relaxation. It offers a variety of guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing exercises, and relaxing music to help reduce stress and improve overall mental wellbeing.

Another friend of mine, introduced me to an app earlier this year that actually reminds you of your mortality at different times throughout the day. The app, called **WeCroak** costs \$0.99 and gives daily reminders via push notifications. Why would I want to pay for an app that tells me that I’m going to die? (*The app literally sends the same message*

*each time: “Don’t forget, you’re going to die.”*) It’s because this is really a reminder not to sweat the small stuff. A lot of the drama and concern that seems important during our daily lives, just won’t matter in the end. I think it’s important to stay focused on the big picture as much as we can.

Another app is called **Forest** and costs \$1.99. This app is perfect for holding you accountable during your #Unplugged moments. When you first open the app, you set a time you’d like to avoid using your phone and simply tap on “*Plant*”. At this stage, a tree will begin to grow. If you use your phone to make a call or check an app before the allotted time is up, you’ll interrupt the growth of your tree and it will die. If you do wait for the full amount of time to pass, the tree will flourish, and you can begin to plant an entire forest with additional trees every time you unplug. To me, this is a perfect metaphor and meditation wrapped into one.

These apps can help you to stay focused on your goals while detoxing from excess technology. While I encourage you to make your own rules while #Unplugging, I do believe that at least a few times a year, #Unplugging with absolutely no use of technology is the most beneficial thing of all. At the end of the day, we’ve only got one life to live. How we use it is up to us, so let’s be in the moment and pay attention to what matters most. I won’t stop trying to convince you to unplug, until you’ve shared your first unplugged story with me. This practice is totally transformational and is something you can get started with...right now.

# 5

## Your Stories

**“Turning off social media, not checking email, and not feeling the urge to immediately respond to text messages removes that ever-present *“being connected”* weight from my shoulders and allows me to enjoy just being in the moment.”**

**Garret Pachtinger**, VMD, DACVECC, Co-Founder, VETgirl

Those pitfalls I mentioned in previous chapters, well, they can be pretty serious. Not only has constant online connectivity like social media led to the increasing prevalence of ADHD, but it's also contributed to increasing rates of anxiety and depression found across society at large. This [report from NBC News](#) reviewed 41 million individuals and found rising depression rates across Americans from all age groups. It also highlights the most dangerous part: depression is rising the fastest amongst both teens and young adults.

Dr. Laurel Williams, chief of psychiatry at Texas Children's Hospital was interviewed for the study and stated the following: *“Many people are worried about how busy they are. There's a lack of community. There's the amount of time that we spend in front of screens and not in front of other people.”* With this study in mind, it's easy to see the double-edged sword that is our increasing connectivity. On one hand, productivity can be boosted, we gain access to new and convenient technologies and we can FaceTime our friends just by prompting Siri. On the other hand, these same benefits may be taking a long-term toll on our mental health.



**A Pew Research Center poll** found that approximately 26% of Americans are “*almost constantly*” online, a figure that’s on the rise. Since I’ve written on the subject a number of times, I wanted to engage my friends and colleagues about their experiences, to better learn the myths, misconceptions and varied encounters that can come from unplugging. By sharing what others do, I hope to explore how universal the benefits of unplugging can be and how the experience is different for everyone. It’s important to note that I engaged a wide range of peers for this discussion. Some work as practice managers, practicing veterinarians, and technicians, while some work in corporate roles, are business consultants, patient care coordinators, practice owners, former veterinary students, and beyond. I wanted to emphasize a wide range of experiences here to better understand the power of unplugging and how it can lend itself uniquely to different individuals, while still offering consistent positive psychological benefits.

**Here are the questions that I asked when surveying my peers:**

- **Did you hesitate to unplug? If so, why?  
What excuses did you give yourself?**
- **Did your clients and/or employer get upset with you when you unplugged?**
- **When you came back, were you so overwhelmed that you regretted unplugging?**

Remember, just like unplugging itself, there is no wrong answer or singular technique. Every individual has a different approach, which is a big reason the answers I received were so amazing. Each response shared a small slice of the power of the present moment, something that’s so often obscured when we’re stuck looking at our phones.

Let's read on to hear what people shared with me when asked about their own #Unplugged to reflect on what we can learn from these experiences, for some I'll share my own thoughts:

“As much as I love social media and its potential for connectivity, sharing optimism and upside, I also love the power of unplugging. Thank you for keeping attention on this! A personal example – this week I'm working remotely out of my sister's house which allows me to visit with my mom (*Tootie!*) who lives in a skilled nursing facility a few miles down the road. Every morning on my way to visit with her I stop by Freeman Lake to capture a picture of something interesting (*the sunrise is one of her personal favorites*). Before breakfast, I show her the pictures I took that morning and then we look at pics from her kiddos' Instagram and Facebook accounts. She LOVES it. Sometimes I'll post messages on her behalf to her friends and family members.

Then I put my phone on silent, and we enjoyed breakfast, followed by as many hands of gin rummy as we could get in before my first call of the day. I am so very grateful for this time with her. During my evening visits, we might play around with Snapchat filters (*cracks us both up*) or Snapchat video call with Hubs, then the phone goes away for more hands of rummy and time with Tootie. What great perspective and contentment it brings to unplug and be in the moment with those we love!”

**Mia Cary**, DVM, AVMA, Chief of Professional Development & Strategic Alliances

Dr. Cary uses unplugging to spend quality time with family and even occasionally uses technology, in a mindful way, to have some fun with her mom (*I can relate*)! Since she's consciously deciding when to put her phone away and to immerse herself fully in the moment, she

shows us the power we have over our technology use and our ability to choose what matters most.

“Social media has been the biggest distraction for me in veterinary school. I can’t even imagine how many times I visit these platforms on my phone each day. It has become a normal reflex to open Instagram and Facebook each time I unlock my screen. I find myself with these platforms open in my tabs while I’m trying to do school work. I often stay up late working on content for my accounts instead of studying.

By going unplugged in the little moments that I have this past week, I have come to realize that there is great value in this. Our profession already faces too many stressors, why should we keep adding to that? Plus, it saves on your battery life!”

**Trusten Moore**, DVM, Western Uni. of Health Sciences, College of Vet Medicine, Class of 2020

While social media can be a useful component of marketing and can be personally rewarding as well, it can also be distracting and a constant source of comparison. Dr. Moore shows us how taking small moments away from technology can help us to gain a bird’s-eye view on our usage to decide more objectively if our technology use is healthy.

“I struggled to follow your advice. I simply couldn’t walk away from communications (*even social media*) for a week, much less a month. They are just part of my job, and when I was away, I felt more anxiety than relaxation. I think it’s also possible that I genuinely suffered from social media addiction. I felt like I was missing things when I wasn’t looking, and the desire to check in nagged at me. Looking back, it was a problem for sure.

The biggest thing that helped me was taking up mindfulness meditation; just sitting without my phone and breathing for 10 minutes once or twice a day. This was a huge step for me in calming my mind and turning off that constant seeking behavior that keeps us looking for stimuli every waking moment. When I started taking time to sit, suddenly I just didn't have the compulsion to check my phone constantly. The ability to put my phone down and walk away for a few hours at a time appeared, even though that's not why I started doing these short meditation breaks. It was a total side effect. I have found it really useful to leave my phone plugged in and not put it in my pocket at home or at the clinic. The mild inconveniences when I don't have it are more than balanced out by the better conversations I have with my staff. I'm just more present.”

**Andy Roark**, DVM, Author, Speaker, Veterinarian

Dr. Roark noticed that his conversations and interactions were fuller and more meaningful when he was unplugged. This is a huge observation since our technology use can shorten our attention spans and make daily interactions feel more perfunctory. His initial experience, where disconnecting created anxiety, is actually quite common but can be easily surmounted with practice.

“Although you would expect that unplugging from technology leads to Fear of Missing Out (*FOMO*), it is oddly liberating! Turning off social media, not checking email, and not feeling the urge to immediately respond to text messages removes that ever-present “*being connected*” weight from my shoulders and allows me to enjoy just being in the moment.

If you are unplugging from technology, you wouldn't just fall off the grid. Think about simple steps you can take to make this transition easier. If you have any pending business, send your colleagues a note ahead of time informing them you will not be available during that period. Create an auto-reply email as well as text message letting your connections know you will be unavailable between certain dates. More importantly, let these connections know if the message is urgent to redirect them to another resource for immediate answers. Re-directing important emails to a colleague while you are away will limit that email inbox stress when you return to the office.”

**Garret Pachtinger**, VMD, DACVECC, Co-Founder, VETgirl

This insight, which focuses on the practical aspects of unplugging, is too important to overlook. Simple things like redirecting emails and setting up a proper auto-reply can allow you to unplug more easily and avoid that nagging feeling of FOMO, too!

“I am a work in progress as far as unplugging. I have never unplugged on the level that you do when you unplug, but with the upcoming Memorial Day weekend, maybe I should try it! The last time I was remotely close to unplugging was about three weeks ago when I attended my daughter's 5th grade overnight field trip to the NC coast. Because we were in somewhat of a remote place with limited access to the internet, decent phone reception and could not bring our devices (*only cell phones*), I was somewhat pushed into being unplugged.

My out of office message directed everyone to the corporate office and I think there was a mention of having limited access to the internet. When things would come through on my cell phone, I forwarded them to my assistant to handle and even

one email was forwarded to Mark to handle. I did take advantage of this time and feel good about being able to slightly unplug.”

**Monica Dixon Perry**, CVPM, Management Consultant

I love Monica’s example because her overnight experience shows us that the benefits of unplugging and tuning into our surroundings can take place in just moments, it doesn’t have to require entire weeks. This is a great way to get started, with a daily unplug, or an overnight or weekend!

“I had to actually delete the apps from my phone, so I wasn’t “*accidentally*” hitting them. Once I did that, it was an official cutting of the cord. I didn’t miss it at all after the second day. It wasn’t an option and I was thrilled.

I remember watching my son play in the pool and looking out on the beach beyond him and then looking over and seeing my two friends and one of their kids sitting next to me, looking at their phones. I was like “*what are you doing? Look at how awesome this (our vacation spot) is!*” Seeing that hilarious cat meme and crazy case post in the vet group won’t mean anything to me in twenty years. That view and that memory will.”

**Caitlin DeWilde**, DVM, The Social DVM

How powerful is that? Caitlin felt that the moment she was in, without pinning, posting, snapping, tagging etc. was enough. The ability to soak in our surroundings without frequent distraction is one of the most important benefits of unplugging.

“Once my doctor diagnosed me with anxiety, I started to analyze my life and see where I could change, and I noticed that social media was taking up too much of my time and I was too involved in it. The need to have the perfect appearance and be IG ready was now bringing me anxiety. Instead of enjoying the moment I was looking to have the IG perfect picture.

Once I turned off all the notifications, I noticed I was more productive without feeling like everything needed my attention all the time.”

**Vera Lima**, Practice Administrator, Owner, Carleton & Lanark Veterinary Services,  
Founder, Canadian Veterinary Hospital Management

Too much technology can exacerbate pre-existing anxiety or even create it, to begin with. Vera’s simple choice to turn off her notifications showcase the profound difference and increased day-to-day enjoyment that eliminating easily preventable stressors can improve.

“Of course, I hesitated to unplug! My main concern is the amount of work I will have to do afterward to get caught up. It comes down to a value proposition: will I get enough out of being unplugged, even for a few days, to justify working a little harder afterward? The answer is yes! The key was to schedule time – I usually schedule a morning – designated only for getting caught up once I plug back in. That makes it workable for me.

My staff answer client emails when doctors need to be offline or on vacation. They can either handle the query themselves or get help from a technician or another DVM to answer the client. We set up an auto-reply for Facebook which has helped a lot. We only answer simple queries on Facebook – clients are

directed to call the clinic or email with anything more involved. That means I can delegate any staff person to monitor Facebook messages when I am offline.”

**Susan Little**, DVM, DABVP (Feline)

I think one key is to set good boundaries from the start. I think too many vets make themselves personally available (*personal cell phones, Facebook accounts, etc.*) rather than having everything flow through business communications. That’s an important boundary to set. Your personal and professional life should be separated! That also makes it easier to unplug.

“I decided to unplug for my mental health! My family deserves my time as much as work did and sometimes it’s a harsh reality. When your son comes home and says I can’t even talk to you because you are either at work, talking about work or on the phone texting/talking to work! That’s not okay.

I wasn’t overwhelmed at all. Many of the work texts were resolved on their own before I was even able to respond (*AND THAT IS OK TOO*).

It is definitely a decision you need to make and stick with. I have also introduced meditation into my life to allow me to decompress. Stress can add years on and be so detrimental to your health.”

**Annie Wian**, Former Patient Care Coordinator, Veterinary Medical Clinic, Inc

I mean, how relatable is Annie? I think a lot of us can say we’ve been here. I can only imagine it hurts when your own kids call attention to your inability to disconnect. But, I also challenge you to think about the examples we set for future youth.



“To be honest, I was not scared to try it. I was on Phuket in the most amazing surroundings ever, it was a last minute decision, set it up in 5 minutes (*let my partner know*) and added it to my calendar. It was only for 3 days and most of my colleagues knew I was abroad.

Some (*of my colleagues and friends*) were surprised, as I am a social media junkie. The cold turkey withdrawal thing was a bit unexpected.

I felt awesome! I only used my phone for pictures and to listen to my audiobooks, while on a white sandy beach sipping adult beverages.

When I came back... there were approx. 250 emails waiting (*I receive approx. 50-75 emails a day*) and your wise words to plan one day for just catching up is a good one. The nice thing is that some very very urgent things seem to resolve themselves. Now I am warning people approx. a week in advance that I am offline. I let the people that absolutely need to reach me know to text or set your phone to accept when your mother calls. *Insider tip: A cruise is the best excuse as you do not have internet.*”

[Jolle Kirpensteijn](#), DVM, PhD, DACVS, DECVS, Chief Veterinary Officer, Hill's Pet Global

It's key to highlight something Dr. Kirpensteijn mentions because it is often a key reason people don't unplug: “*there were approx. 250 emails waiting*”. A lot of friends and colleagues tell me it's easier to do a little bit each day instead of letting it pile up. This is why I always recommend carving out a day to just catch up. Get back to work but try and limit (*or prohibit*) seeing appointments on your first day back

to allow you to catch up. I often carve out one day of my return to just focus on catching up by email.

“I have a personal goal of getting out in the mountains at least once a week. I can't always get out there, but when I do it's around 8 hours unplugged. The only thing I use my phone for is to take pics. For me, spending time alone in the woods is essential for my mental and emotional well-being. There's just something about raw nature that cleanses the soul. And of course, I turn my phone off at night.”

**Amy Laferte**, Veterinary Technician

She's a breath of fresh air. Or literally breathing fresh air! Get outside, enjoy nature, and focus on being present.

“I am an overachieving, overextended mother, student, volunteer, and practice manager. I was also the sole admin of all of our practice's social media channels at the time. I knew I had hit rock bottom when my phone buzzing began to make me jump like an alarm clock waking me from a dead sleep. Whether it was a negative review at 1 am or an *“I love you”* message from my husband, all of it just made me cringe. I was overdue for a break, so I enlisted the help of one of our doctor's and I powered down personally and professionally for a few weeks. I want to serve my clients and my staff well but I let it get out of control by not setting healthy boundaries. During my cleanse, I realized that I was more loving and patient in all aspects of my life. Now I know to take a day or two off before it gets that bad. Usually, I pick weekends for this unless it's my week to work Saturday.”

**Rebecca May**, Practice Manager, Town 'N' County Animal Hospital

That “*cringe*” feeling Rebecca highlighted is a key indicator of needing to unplug. For me, if I go too long without unplugging, I start to feel what Rebecca feels and it reminds me that I need to plan sometime to go and unplug to be able to shake that feeling.

“I have mini unplugs. I’m trying to leave my phone in my locker at the gym. That’s 2-6 hours a week. I have my phone on do not disturb except for family every night while I’m sleeping. On weekends I try to only check it every hour or two. It makes a big difference when I make a conscious effort to put it down.”

**Cherie Buisson**, DVM, Owner, Helping Hands Pet Hospice

Dr. Buisson is right! Mini unplugs are amazing. And that is exactly our previous chapter on “Go Ahead, Steal the Moment: Unplugged Moments” is all about.

“Every night I unplug. I plug my phone in the kitchen with the ringer off. It is not in my room, not even close! I learned I had to do this. At one point I found myself answering calls at all hours for work. I’ve also found that even the ping notifications can wake me up if I’m not in a deep sleep. It took some time to get used to it but it is very relaxing now. There are times I’ll put the phone in its place early when it’s been one of those days to start that cycle early.”

**Nanette Smith**, Med, RVT, CVT, LVT

These quotes, ranging from #Unplugged experts to those trying it for the very first time, show us firsthand the huge range of experiences available to those who are willing to examine and temporarily reduce their technology use. At every stage, beginner through expert, there are different obstacles and lessons to be learned. While withdrawal from technology is real and can be difficult at first, the

benefits of experiencing the calm, present mind without technological dependence can have lasting benefits ranging from the temporal (*fully enjoying the last rays of a gorgeous sunset*) to the long-term (*learning to control breathing and monitor anxious tendencies*). Technology comes with its own long list of pros and cons, but it's important to keep in mind that we ultimately control our use of it, instead of the other way around.

Polished iPhones and cutting-edge apps can definitely be engaging and fun, but if this constant connectivity makes us lose our access to the present moment, that's a steeper cost than many of us might realize. #Unplugging isn't something that you need to buy or even have shipped overnight from Amazon. It's a tool that can make your life richer simply by helping you to realize how much you already have, right here in this moment.

# 6

## Power Down: Your Stories

Please note, there is slight overlap in content for this chapter from the previous chapter. However, the stories shared by each individual include a different perspective than those shared in the previous chapter and I encourage you to continue reading this follow-up chapter.

Think about this for a moment, we're more plugged into technology than ever before — a chapter in human history that has inspired widespread social activism, provided a boon to developing economies and bonded us to friends and family worldwide — constant connectivity comes at a price.

The price of constant connectivity? Well, a report from NBC News assessed 41 million individuals and found rising rates of depression across all age groups. The report stated: *“Diagnosis of major depression has risen dramatically by 33% since 2013.”* If that statistic doesn't give you pause, you might want to read it again.

While not all those cases could be attributed solely to social media use and digital connectivity, Laurel Williams, D.O., the chief of psychiatry at Texas Children's Hospital explained: *“I wouldn't say that social media is responsible for a rise in depression — more the being rushed and lack of connections that we have in the structure of how we live lives now.”*

Since #unplugging ritually had such a positive impact on my ability to focus, build my business and recognize when I had had enough,

I started sharing tips with the veterinary profession, colleagues and peers. My hope was that they would begin to try #unplugging, too, and realizing insights and benefits. Many of them have begun to implement the practice as a powerful tool for combatting the stress and strain of modern life and always being on call, even outside of business hours.

You read some of their stories in the last chapter. Now, let's get back to hearing more stories and perspectives from different colleagues and some of the same colleagues with even more perspective. You will find some duplication in stories as this version of the chapter was originally run as an independent feature in Today's Veterinary Business.

“My smartwatch is connected to my cell phone. My cell phone is connected to my iPad. My iPad is connected to my MacBook. And the more I think about it, the more I realize the addiction is to being connected, not simply an addiction to technology. Many people, including myself, hesitate to take breaks from technology due to their fear of being disconnected.”

**Garret Pachtinger**, VMD, DACVECC, VETGirl, Co-Founder

Dr. Pachtinger's quote sheds light on the entire phenomenon. Sure, we like our social media and apps, but we love feeling desired and connected. That is the driving reason for technology addiction, and recognizing it is incredibly important to your awareness of why we use technology.

“I consider myself a huge advocate for the use of social media in the veterinary profession, but as I go along on this journey, I have quickly realized that it has its faults. While getting connected with hundreds of vet students from all over the

world on social media, I have found myself in a constant state of comparison, self-doubt and poor concentration. I find myself comparing the content that I create to others on a daily basis. Is it good enough? Will it get views, likes and shares? I try not to do this, but it's human nature.”

**Trusten Moore**, DVM, Western Uni. of Health Sciences, College of Vet Medicine, Class of 2020

Sure, Trusten's reflection and sentiment is shared by so many of us. By taking time away from technology during a ritual #Unplugged, doubt slowly begins to ease its grip over your happiness, and you can select when to participate in social media.

“The last time I was remotely close to unplugging was when I attended my daughter's fifth-grade overnight field trip. Because we were in somewhat of a remote place with limited access to the internet and could bring only cell phones, I was somewhat pushed into being unplugged. I felt as if the time with my daughter was actually quality time not interrupted by a Facebook or Slack post or any other of the gazillion notifications I receive on a daily basis.”

**Monica Dixon Perry**, CVPM, Practice Consultant

Monica shows us that she was able to tune in during her daughter's field trip and pay more attention to an important personal relationship without the distraction of technology. She didn't expect to be unplugged but took full advantage of her remote location by diving into an impromptu #Unplugged.

“This week I'm working remotely out of my sister's house, which allows me to visit with my mom, who lives in a skilled nursing facility a few miles down the road. Every morning on my way to visit with her, I stop by Freeman Lake to capture a picture

of something interesting. (*The sunrise is one of her personal favorites.*) Before breakfast, I show her the pictures I took that morning and then we look at pics from her kiddos' Instagram and Facebook accounts. She loves it. Sometimes I'll post messages on her behalf to her friends and family members. Then I put my phone on silent and we enjoy breakfast followed by as many hands of gin rummy as we can get in before my first call of the day. I am so very grateful for this time with her.”

**Mia Cary**, DVM, Veterinary Consultant

I love this example because Dr. Cary brings a mindful approach to her technology use. She'll utilize social media to share pictures of her children, but she has no problem putting the phone away when the time comes to switch gears. This is a wonderful example of our power over technology instead of the other way around. Let your technology be a tool that you can pick up and put down as needed to put your attention where it matters most.

“I think one key is to set good boundaries from the start. Too many vets make themselves personally available (*personal cell phones, Facebook accounts, etc.*) rather than having everything flow through business communications. That's an important boundary to set. Your personal and professional lives should be separated. That also makes it easier to unplug.”

**Susan Little**, DVM, DABVP (Feline)

Dr. Little makes a crucial point here. Like many of us, she's found #unplugging to be beneficial, but she has to balance it with her daily work needs. She mentions boundaries as a way to make #unplugging easier. While the veterinary profession is a highly personal business, you are not obligated to respond to each call or email.



The right structure can help you separate your professional life from your personal one.

“When I came back (*from unplugging*), approximately 250 emails were waiting. (*I receive 50 to 75 a day.*) The nice thing is that some very, very urgent things seem to resolve themselves. Now, I am warning people approximately a week in advance that I am offline. I let the people that absolutely need to reach me know to text. Or set your phone to accept when your mother calls.”

**Jolle Kirpensteijn**, Chief Veterinary Officer, Hill's Pet Global

Dr. Kirpensteijn shares an important point: “*Some very, very urgent things seem to resolve themselves.*” The need to catch up with their workload is one reason people tend to not unplug. I always tell them: Would you rather go full force 24/7 and risk being too plugged in and suffer from the nasty side effects: fatigue, burnout, agitation and mood swings? Or would you rather take time to unplug from it all and schedule a day or two to catch up but be in a fully recharged state of mind?

“I'll admit, I enjoyed unplugging so much that I extended it another full day when we got back from vacation. I had a full inbox, for sure, but it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. The key was a little prep work and safeguards: lots of scheduled content, a trusted team member to monitor, setting expectations in advance with my clients, a really great vacation auto-responder message, and a chunk of time when I got back just for clearing out my inbox and notifications. I'll do it again in a heartbeat. It was worth the effort.”

**Caitlin DeWilde**, DVM, The SocialDVM

The glowing review from Dr. DeWilde shows us the pragmatic side of planning time away. She was better able to enjoy her vacation by scheduling posts and delegating tasks to her team. She allocated time to catch up upon her return, something I'd recommend as well.

“Initially, unplugging was quite stressful. Technology is addicting, and I'll admit I'm a technophile. But every day I'm developing a healthier relationship with technology, with the internet, with social media. Believe it or not, I've largely been able to turn FOMO, the fear of missing out, into JOMO, (*joy of missing out*). In the words of Robert Frost, 'That has made all the difference.'”

**Christopher Byers**, DVM, DACVECC, DACVIM (SAIM), CVJ, Critical Care Veterinarian

Dr. Byers had an important reflection here because he understands that his relationship with technology is an evolving process. Sure, FOMO might creep in here and again, but he's able to examine it mindfully and give it less power over time.

“I've learned that if people really need me, they can call me directly. Nowadays the only notifications turned on are my regular texts. Employees know that if they need to reach me, they need to call or send a text during business hours. There are no social media or email notifications. I still check them throughout the day, but I feel more in control of when.”

**Vera Lima**, Practice Administrator, Owner, Carleton & Lanark Veterinary Services, Founder, Canadian Veterinary Hospital Management

Vera's notion of control is important since by customizing her notifications and altering her perspective on urgency, she's gained confidence in being selective about her social media use. Even small changes can make a big difference when it comes to defining when

technology use is required.

“My own happiness is simply greater when I am not *‘on call’* and not carrying my cell phone for large blocks of time during the day is a tradeoff that I have chosen to make. I have zero regrets. I have found it really useful to leave my phone plugged in and not put it in my pocket at home or at the clinic. The mild inconveniences when I don’t have it are more than balanced out by the better conversations I have with my staff. I’m just more present.”

**Andy Roark**, DVM, Author, Speaker, Veterinarian

Dr. Roark shows us this simple yet extremely useful tip. If we just don’t keep our phone on us all the time, we can be more present and in the moment. We can better focus on building stronger relationships with the people we surround ourselves with.

While technology has forever altered the world around us and comes with truly wonderful benefits, we must control our use of it instead of letting it control us and our happiness. Remember that while technology is a wonderful tool, tuning in to the world and people around you can make your life richer. You will realize how much you already have right here in the moment.

You don’t even need a charger!

# 7

## Disconnecting to Connect Again

At the time of writing this chapter, this will mark my 7th summer of finding time to go fully #Unplugged...or it would have if things hadn't gone...the way that it has. It's safe to say that nobody saw 2020 coming. Between never-ending elections, the stock market crash, raging wildfires from Australia to California, and a devastating global pandemic... no one really escaped this year truly unscathed. **And that's without even mentioning the change in our profession!**

Veterinary practices made major shifts to accommodate COVID-19 social distancing practices during the pandemic, having to pivot away from the norm of offering care inside their offices to creating curbside service. Veterinarians and their teams have all had to adjust their way of doing things, as they've had to learn how to keep the vital relationships they've built with clients by handling treatment and triage over the phone instead of in-person — having to add telemedicine services and online pharmacies to their practices virtually overnight. Creating protocols out of thin air (*and doing so flawlessly might I add*).

Instead of visits slowing, veterinary practices were busier than they have ever been, thanks in no small part to the 11.38 million households who have **welcomed in a new pet during the pandemic** between 2020 - 2021. We know according to research, **emotional support animals have been on the rise**. Veterinary practices already operating under less-than-ideal conditions, were short-staffed thanks to necessary protocols to minimize exposure...or have team members out of work due to COVID, which caused further disruption to the practice and staffing as well.

Everyone is doing the absolute best that they can to make their practice safe, even though it comes at the expense of shrinking teams and hours in order to make things work. And they've done it all, under the stress of working during a global pandemic, and all of the fear and **mental distress** that comes with it: the anxiety of getting sick or worse, making the ones you love sick, too.

But at the heart of it all, the veterinary profession remained resilient in the face of so much uncertainty in order to do what we do best: providing exceptional care to our client's precious pets.

2020 was a challenging but rewarding time for me personally, as I kept myself busy supporting veterinary professionals in their shift. From speaking to veterinary professionals in-person to virtually, creating lectures about how practices are using technology during COVID to encourage and inspire other clinics and hospitals on how they can implement those tools as well.

I've been fortunate to work with several key industry companies across the world on projects aimed at helping practices this year, which felt like valuable, important work. In fact, it seemed like every day there was another big, important opportunity presented to us at Simply Done Tech Solutions in order to help make a difference this year, and everything was urgent and required my immediate attention and was always due the next day — or, so it seemed.

In less than one month during the pandemic, I co-founded a new virtual conference, **NoodleU** with my incredible friend, **Dr. Mary Gardner**, for the veterinary community looking for CE in 2020, and then went on to put on several more events just months later.

In the meantime, my business partners and I worked on changing how we communicate with veterinary practices at Fidu, and how best to connect them with boarded veterinary specialists. And to top it all off, this year was the much-anticipated launch of our new social media management subscription service for busy veterinary professionals.

Needless to say, I was always working. Constantly. And working 300 days from home gets old fast. For someone who is used to traveling over 200,000 miles a year for their work, and handling business in person and on the go, my new business days involved traveling from my bedroom to my office, upstairs and downstairs, 7 am-8 pm, day in, day out. Wake up, eat breakfast, work, eat dinner, go to bed, and do it all over again. And again. And again. If variety is the spice of life, then I have struggled with losing it in 2020. I don't want to sound like I'm complaining. In fact, it's far from it: I'm thankful I managed the pandemic healthily and that I have thriving businesses. Not everyone was so fortunate. But the cost was my mental health.

Disconnecting didn't really feel like an option during the pandemic — I was on my phone nonstop, thumbing through direct messages on Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, WhatsApp, iMessage, Slack...and the list goes on. I hardly knew who I was messaging where anymore. As someone who doesn't generally suffer from anxiety, 2020 was the most anxious year of my life. And I know I'm not the only one. Even those of us lucky enough not to be suffering the worst effects of the pandemic have found the constant **barrage of bad news** whilst **living in isolation**, frankly exhausting.

As I've reflected and looked back on it, trying to figure out what I could have done better I realized that I'd forgotten the practice of unplugging. For most of 2020, it was something I could only dream of doing. How does one unplug from the rest of the world, when that's

the only way we're supposed to be connected in 2020?

According to the Pew Research Center, only **1-in-10 Americans** feel that Social Media has had mostly positive effects on the way things are going in their lives, in no small part thanks to the ways in which it has helped form a stronger divide between people of different beliefs and political parties. **Studies have shown** that in spite of our human desire to stay connected, social media has **often made us feel worse** about ourselves and even about each other, creating addictive personalities, echo chambers, and jealous mindsets.

Thankfully, I forced myself to prioritize my sense of well-being near the end of 2020 during the Thanksgiving holiday and #Unplugged for just over a week. And ultimately, I was right: it was just what I needed. It was a lesson I've had to teach myself, again and again, every year, but 2020 especially.

Unplugging from the nonstop stream of work and messages allowed my creative energy to reset and come back, giving it the reset it desperately needed after a year of 24/7 non-stop constant connectivity. **Giving yourself the time you need to explore other hobbies and rest, without agenda, can allow you to appreciate the work that you do have when you go back to it.** While in the past I've used this #Unplugged time to fly far away, in 2020, I found new ways to appreciate what I have at home, and it's something I continue to do well beyond 2020. That week I carved out time to just read, and do yard work, and ultimately, focus on me and my family. When I plugged back in I was ready to tackle the world again... but since I had not prioritized #unplugging when I usually do. I didn't write about it in 2020 (*normally I publish an article at least once a year*)... At least, I hadn't until the end of 2020.

I use these #Unplugged stories (*now chapters in this book*) to encourage others and remind myself of why unplugging is so valuable for our mental health as a constantly connected culture. As I reflect back on 2020, I can see all of its unique challenges and struggles, but I can also see as we reached the end of the pandemic the perfect opportunity for us all to take some time to unplug, so we can enter this new chapter of life feeling refreshed and ready for what the future has for us. That's why I chose to end an extremely difficult year (*in everyone's life*) #Unplugged.

I learned again the importance of taking a step back from technology and work and social media, and all of the other constant distractions and notifications in order to remind ourselves of what's really important and live a more meaningful life. This is where I normally share some tips or advice, but during the pandemic the only piece of advice I wanted to offer was to set aside some time for yourself. Something that continues to be simple even to this day. Go outside and get some fresh air, take a walk in your neighborhood, or go find some nature to explore. Get cozy if it's cold out, cuddle up on your couch in your pjs with a cup of coffee or tea and a good book, challenge yourself with something fun like a puzzle or an article, or some household projects you've been meaning to get to. You can wash your car, re-decorate your house, catch up on your favorite show, take a nap, spend time with your pets, or do really anything but go on your phone, or touch social media. Delete the apps if you have to: they'll always be there for you to download again. When you've given yourself this chance to reset, you can trust that when you look back on the past in the rearview mirror, you'll be able to say in spite of all the challenges you've faced, you've made it through and won.



Now that the pandemic seems behind us, this is a good reminder that no matter the obstacles we'll face in the future as a global society, and trust me, we will face them, that despite how hectic and non-stop that life will seem, we need to constantly remind ourselves to slow down and remember what's important. For me, it's taking time aside from work, as you can see, and unplugging to focus on what is in front of me (*friends, family, my pets*), and enjoy the downtime and boredom that comes with unplugging. And speaking of boredom...

# 8

## Embracing Boredom

I'm bored. And yet, I'm also filled with inspiration. As I write this, it's the fifth morning of one of my 10-day unplugged journeys. I'm sitting outside, resting in the cool breeze of spring. It's in the low eighties, comfortable for where I lay in one of my favorite places in the world. The birds are chirping loudly, and I've already downed two cups of coffee. I started my morning reading my third book of this #Unplugged trip. My second book lays discarded, for now, to my side nearby, resting on top of the first novel, which I had already devoured, reading it all in one sitting. I had exchanged the second for something fictional, a different kind of distraction. As I sit reading, my mind wanders as it often does when I'm unplugged. Random memories of my childhood and other nostalgic thoughts come to me when I allow them to. Other times I'm distracted, thinking about the work I have temporarily set aside, vying for my attention (*even when it's supposed to be left alone*).

It's hard not to think about one of my biggest projects of this year — a 12-week series of virtual events tailored for the pet health community — or the over 4,000 participants that have already registered. This event targets veterinary professionals from all across the globe, from South America to Ukraine, South East Asia, and everywhere in between, and our message, focusing on demonstrating how to build a digital footprint that engages pet owners in lifelong care, and all of its supplemental materials will be translated into 5 different languages. There is a lot of weight on my shoulders to make sure this project is extremely successful and to deliver for our industry partner. Only

a few short hours after I plug back in, I'll be back to focusing my attention on this by kicking off our first event, other projects, and resuming that life after this brief intermission. This maybe isn't the best time to have chosen to unplug, but there really is never a good time.

My next read is interesting. The characters are a bit odd, but I'm engaged. Naturally, as my mind drifts off, I can't help but think about the whole process of being unplugged, and my passion to advocate for such practices. Every chapter I write tries to convince skeptics to try it and remind converts why it is so important. This chapter, I thought, why not write about being unplugged while I'm unplugged? Why not share the perspective while it's fresh on my mind? I take out my journal, and start to write.

So here they are, my #Unplugged thoughts, compiled in a day, halfway through my unplugged journey. As I look back during the pandemic, I know I almost lost sight of why I do this in the first place, unplugging about ¼ of the time I normally do. As 2020 came to an end in December, I told myself I would return to regularly unplugging, and started the new year off right, allowing myself to live in the moment. Then, in February of the following year, I unplugged again for 4 days. As I wrote this journal entry, back in March of that same year, it was during another series of 10 phoneless, digitally unplugged days. After that spring, I unplugged again in the summer as well, as I often do. But even then, as I wrote, considering my time away from my phone, the usual fears came slinking back: *“Is it too much? Will people be annoyed? Will clients be angry? Will people roll their eyes?”*

These are questions I've heard other #Unplugged hopefuls ask before, and normally I've been able to reassure them (*and myself*) that they aren't practical, though at the time, they feel like rational

concerns. The more you create a habit, and the more you follow through, you'll hear the whispers of these concerns less and less as you realize that clients and work partners are generally accommodating to your needs. But since I lost my routine last year, resuming it has helped these fears come creeping back. I had already set the safeguards up, the practical tasks that should have been reassuring enough: I had already let everyone I was in correspondence with for work know, weeks in advance when I would be unplugging. I set my email signature to demonstrate this as I have before, letting them know what was coming, but even still, I worried. I was afraid of opening the emails of certain important contacts, half expecting a *"What!?! You're going to unplug in the middle of our project?!"* Or even a, *"Again!?! Really?"* **Of course, the response was the exact opposite.**

There was the regular, *"I know you're going to be unplugged, so can we touch base before you go?"* Of course, I always expect this and set up my calendar to accommodate these welcomed requests. I always like reading, *"Enjoy your time unplugged!"* But admittedly, my favorite response is, *"I can't wait to try this!"* With those responses helping to assuage my fears yet again, the work days flew by, and before I knew it, it was time.

The first day of being unplugged is always a little strange for me. Only hours before, I was going from checking multiple social media accounts, messaging on platforms like Whatsapp, and toggling between my phone and desktop to check my email, task management software like Asana, Salesforce, Slack, and all of the other apps that run my life (*and keep it from getting any more chaotic*). Going from this, to totally removing myself from my phone aside from the occasional glance to make sure no family or work emergencies need my attention is always going to give you a little bit of whiplash or

withdrawal. In order to appreciate and find balance, you have to experience both extremes.

Even without the added stress of a work or family emergency, the process of starting to unplug always feels odd. My home screen is left bare after I intentionally delete all of the apps my thumbs instinctively go to open, keeping myself in check before I can look at “*one more thing.*” It’s crazy how easily we train our brains to follow certain behaviors... but luckily, after so many years of unplugging, this phase of “*untraining*” isn’t quite as hard. It’s a relief to have set aside the constant noise and notifications of the digital space in exchange for this more quiet and frankly boring world. ***In fact, the more I’ve unplugged, the more I’ve come to appreciate boredom.***

In my experience, boredom is a pretty natural state after the hyper-entertaining, constantly stimulated world most of us live in from the day-to-day. By day two or three, I’m pretty bored. It’s not uncommon to find me staring off at nature, or else smiling, lost in thought, now that my mind is no longer suppressed by the distraction that technology brings. Through boredom, I’m brought back to the awkward years of self-discovery in high school, and the projects and ideas I left behind, unintentionally abandoning them in place of newer and shinier tech solutions.

It’s tempting to distract ourselves instead of allowing our minds, for even a second, to become bored. Let’s face it. Scrolling through social media and email is sometimes our go-to to avoid boredom. But in the end, how many times have we seen something online that leaves us feeling drained instead of inspired? A [Time Magazine article](#) discusses this phenomenon, explaining that oftentimes, when we reach for our phones we are cheating ourselves out of the benefits of boredom, leading to less productive and ultimately less satisfying

distractions that put a strain on our mental health.

Plenty of research has been done about the addictive quality of social media, but **another study suggests** that it can keep us from better, more creative ideas. In fact, it is only when we are bored that our minds try and find really “*novel*” solutions, avoiding predictable or typical responses, leading us to inspiration and ingenuity.

This is usually the point of my unplugged journey where I’m left feeling inspired about life in general, but especially about my work. And this isn’t so surprising: studies show that **boredom can help you focus** on the future, and help you become inspired to set goals. When my mind is allowed to wander some of my best ideas begin to materialize. Whether it’s how to take my business to the next level or the discovery of a new approach I want to try out with clients and incorporate in my teachings, this is when I’m able to look at my work with fresh eyes.

But boredom also leaves me hungry. At this point in the morning, I’m dreaming of breakfast. It’s later than I’d usually eat after waking up, and right now I’m dreaming of eggs, toast with guava jelly, and a glass of mango guava juice. But my appetite isn’t just for food: it’s for integrating the newfound ideas that have inspired me during my time unplugged so far. This is what I love about unplugging.

After I eat, I begin to write down some of the ideas that have come to mind. ***Maybe I’m just dreaming, but great solutions have come from dreams.*** Some of these ideas are certainly not very realistic. And it doesn’t help that, almost always, a familiar series of concerns come to mind: “*What happens to these ideas when you plug back in?*” they ask. “*Do they get added to the pile, or left forgotten under all the other work you have to do?*” They’re not unreasonable questions, especially given the amount of work and all of the other projects I

have in the pipeline, already queued and awaiting my attention.

I can't always answer these questions, at least not right away. I try to take advantage of my inspiration, for now, writing an unfiltered list of goals and ideas that may or may not come to fruition (*a guy can dream*). A more organized person would tell you to try and arrange your list, maybe by what needs doing first, or levels of feasibility, but that's just not how my mind works when I'm unplugged.

Eventually, I'll type these ideas out and email them to myself upon plugging in. It almost always becomes a task list. I keep the list to the front of my mind using the Boomerang app for Gmail. It is an app that will on a set schedule return messages to my inbox. In this case, I'll send myself the email, and schedule it to send back out every 2-3 weeks. If I'm overwhelmed with work, I won't come back to it for a month. The intent is just to keep me coming back to my inbox, to remind me. I never put a set deadline as I do with my current key projects. Instead, I'll try and tackle a task and integrate an idea and eventually cross it off my list.

By not setting a deadline, I avoid setting myself up for failure or the disappointment that comes with deadlines coming and going. For me, it works. Everyone needs to find out what method works best for them.

I abandoned writing this chapter for a bit after getting halfway through to finish reading. Admittedly, I had to take some time to recover. It was a tearjerker! Finding the time to read and get emotionally invested in a story is another benefit to embracing the boredom of unplugging. It gives you time to reflect on what you took away from the story and allows something someone crafted to affect you. Reflection is all part of the unplugged process. Now, as I finish this,

I'm just 24 hours away before I have to plug back in... it's time to wrap up my thoughts.

### **UNPLUGGING THIS SPRING HAS REMINDED ME TO:**

- Embrace boredom and the creativity that comes with it.
- Write down my thoughts, no matter how wild they may seem.
- Take the time to integrate them into my schedule.
- Continue to unplug

And it might seem crazy, but I think applying these simple tips can help you make the most out of your unplugging journey, too. Of course, not every fleeting idea will make a good fit for your work or your lifestyle, but by allowing your mind to rest and giving it time away from the constant attention life requires, you're opening yourself up for new chapters and volumes in your life's story.

Speaking of stories, if you don't mind, I'm going to go back to the book I've previously abandoned and try to wrap it up. If you're curious, it's called "*No Rules Rules: Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention*". And if it doesn't capture my attention, I'll embrace the boredom that comes with it.



# 9

## Finding Balance and Reaping the Benefits

**It's time to get back to the basics.**

As we continue our exploration of the #Unplugged movement, it's essential to continue to remind us all (*including myself*) to strike a balance between our digital and analog lives. Since 2014, I have been passionately writing about the benefits of unplugging from technology and encouraging others to do the same. Over the years, I have tried to convince people of the value of unplugging, and it has been rewarding to see many embrace this lifestyle and experience the benefits firsthand. I do understand there are still some who are hesitant to unplug and resist the benefits but worry not; I will continue my efforts to inspire others to disconnect and experience a more fulfilling life.

This last chapter is focused on helping you find the right balance. Perhaps this might be considered a *“reboot”* or summary of all that we will continue to cover when discussing the benefits and outlining *“how to”* unplug.

While technology continues to bring us incredible advancements and connections, it's also important to recognize its ongoing potential drawbacks. I find that in today's world, it's already much different than when I first unplugged in 2013 and later started this conversation in 2014. In fact, I'd argue it's even more important today than it was in 2013. We simply have more access to more technology that has, for many, become even more addicting and, in some cases, even more harmful.

In this phase of the #Unplugged series, we'll discuss how to find that perfect balance and the benefits you can reap from disconnecting.

## 1: Set Boundaries and Stick to Them

Establishing boundaries is crucial to achieving balance in our digital and analog lives. Determine specific times of the day when you'll disconnect from technology and stick to them. For instance, try setting a rule to avoid screens an hour before bedtime or during meals.

Without boundaries, we can easily fall into the trap of technology addiction, which can negatively impact our relationships, productivity, and overall well-being. For example, constantly checking our phones during meals or conversations with others can be perceived as disrespectful and distracting. Similarly, spending excessive amounts of time on social media can detract from more meaningful activities.

By setting limits on our technology use, we can establish healthy habits and prioritize what truly matters in our lives. This might involve turning off notifications during certain hours of the day, designating screen-free zones in our homes, or committing to a certain amount of daily physical activity or face-to-face social interaction.

Setting boundaries with technology is crucial for achieving a balanced and fulfilling life in the digital age.

## 2: Prioritize Human Connections

Although social media and messaging apps can help us stay connected with friends and loved ones, nothing can replace genuine face-to-face interactions. Schedule regular social activities where you can engage with your loved ones without the interference of technology. These authentic connections will help you feel more fulfilled and grounded in reality.

Interacting with friends and family without the distraction of technology can have a number of benefits for our relationships and overall well-being.

- **Improved communication:** When we're not distracted by our phones or other devices, we can give our full attention to the person we're with. This can help us tune in to nonverbal cues and listen more closely, leading to more meaningful conversations and deeper connections.

I challenge you to play a game the next time you're at dinner with friends and/or family. Require everyone to put their phone in a bowl at the start of dinner, and the person who first picks up their phone must pay the bill.

- **Increased quality time:** When we're not checking our phones or scrolling through social media, we have more time to engage in enjoyable activities with our loved ones. This might include going for a walk, playing a board game, writing, painting, or just sitting and chatting over a cup of coffee (*my absolute preferred thing to do!*).

- **Enhanced emotional well-being:** Spending time with loved ones can boost our mood and reduce stress, but this effect may be even more pronounced when we're not distracted by technology. By fully engaging with the people we care about, we can feel more connected, supported, and fulfilled.

- **Greater creativity:** When not constantly consuming content and notifications from our devices, we may be more likely to engage in creative pursuits or spontaneous activities. This can help us break out of our routines and see the world in new and exciting ways.

Interacting with friends and family without technology can help us build stronger relationships, improve our communication skills, and enhance our emotional well-being. We can reap these benefits and enjoy a more fulfilling life by carving out dedicated time for face-to-face interactions.

### **3: Embrace Solitude and Mindfulness**

In today's fast-paced digital world, taking time for yourself and practicing mindfulness is vital. Whether it's through meditation, yoga, or simply sitting in silence, embracing solitude can help you recharge and gain a better understanding of yourself. Use this time to reflect on your thoughts and emotions without the constant barrage of notifications and digital distractions.

Solitude allows for time to reflect, recharge, and gain perspective. It provides an opportunity to disconnect from the constant stimulation of technology and focus on one's thoughts and emotions.

Mindfulness involves being present in the moment and fully engaged with one's surroundings. It can help reduce stress, improve focus, and promote a sense of calm.

By incorporating solitude and mindfulness practices into our daily routines, we can combat technology fatigue and improve our overall well-being. Some benefits of these practices include increased creativity, improved decision-making skills, and better sleep quality.

It's important to note that technology is not inherently bad; as you know, I'm its biggest advocate, but it's essential to find a healthy balance between the use of technology and the need for solitude and mindfulness. By taking regular breaks from technology, we can recharge our minds and bodies, allowing us to be more productive, creative, and present in our daily lives.

## 4: Cultivate Hobbies and Interests Outside of Technology

Starting new hobbies can be essential for reducing phone usage and promoting a healthier lifestyle. In today's society, it's easy to become consumed by technology, leading to feelings of burnout, anxiety, and other negative emotions. However, by pursuing new hobbies, we can focus on activities that bring us joy and fulfillment and reduce our dependence on our phones.

Hobbies provide an opportunity to learn new skills, meet new people, and engage in activities that promote physical and mental well-being. Whether it's learning a new language, taking up a sport, or pursuing a creative outlet, hobbies can help us disconnect from the digital world and focus on the present moment.

By focusing on hobbies, we can also reduce stress and anxiety, which are often caused by technology's constant stimulation and distractions. Hobbies provide us with a sense of purpose and accomplishment, increasing self-esteem and promoting a more positive outlook on life.

Moreover, hobbies can also improve our overall health and well-being. For example, engaging in physical activities such as hiking, dancing, or yoga can improve cardiovascular health, increase flexibility, and reduce the risk of chronic disease. Pursuing creative hobbies such as painting, writing, or music can also provide a therapeutic outlet for managing stress and anxiety.

I encourage you to find a "hobby accountability buddy." You and your accountability buddy should each find a hobby to focus on independently. For example, my hobby buddy enjoys creating acrylic art. Mine, which you'll learn more about in a second, is about bees and drones. So, every so often, we check in on each other to see if

we're spending time on our hobbies. We're human, and oftentimes we'll go weeks without working on our hobby, but in due time, with constant reminders, we eventually get back to it again.

Starting new hobbies can be a vital step in reducing phone usage and promoting a healthier lifestyle. Focusing on activities that bring us joy and fulfillment can reduce our dependence on technology, improve our mental and physical health, and enhance our overall quality of life. If you're curious about my hobby, it has its own Instagram page (*ironic, I know*). I don't live to post but rather post to show people the value and importance of having a hobby and to show firsthand the joy it brings me. I spend much time enjoying my hobby rather than posting –I promise. Check out my hobby page!

- IG: [@droneguyandabeehive](#)
- Facebook: [Drone Guy and A Beehive](#)
- TikTok: [@droneguyandabeehive](#)

#### **4: Acknowledge and Address “Tech Overload”**

Be mindful of your technology usage and recognize when it's time to take a break. If you find yourself becoming overwhelmed or anxious due to excessive screen time, take a step back and disconnect.

Remember, taking breaks from technology is okay; doing so can help improve your mental health and overall well-being.

Technology overload can have adverse effects on both our physical and mental health. Some common signs of technology overload include:

- Spending excessive amounts of time on screens
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling anxious when not able to access technology (*or, for me, anxious in general*)
- Trouble sleeping (*this is a big indicator for me*)
- Neglecting other vital aspects of life such as socializing, exercise, and hobbies

To prevent technology from consuming you, here are some tips:

- **Set boundaries:** Set limits on how much time you spend on technology daily. For example, you could decide not to use technology for an hour before bed, right when you wake up in the morning, or during meals. No matter what you decide, it's important to start small. I realize one of the biggest mistakes I made when I started writing about this topic was to try and convince everyone to start with 14 full days of no technology. Only now have I realized that isn't realistic and can be challenging for many. Start small and work your way up from there.
- **Take breaks:** Take regular breaks from technology throughout the day to give your eyes and mind a rest. Take a short walk outside or read a book.
- **Unplug:** Try to unplug from technology entirely for a set period each week. This could be for a few hours or an entire day.
- **Prioritize self-care:** Make time for activities that promote your overall health and well-being, such as exercise, meditation, or spending time with loved ones.

By taking these steps, you can prevent technology from overwhelming your life and find a healthy balance between technology use and other important aspects of your life.

Finding balance in our digital and analog lives is critical for maintaining a healthy and fulfilling existence. You have experienced technology overload, that we know, but have you experienced the opposite side of that? No technology at all?

By setting boundaries, prioritizing human connections, embracing solitude, cultivating hobbies, and addressing tech overload, we can reap the benefits of #UNPLUGGING and lead a more balanced, meaningful life. So, what are you waiting for? Let's all make a conscious effort to unplug from technology and practice being fully present in our daily lives. It's time to disconnect and experience the world around you.



# Epilogue

*“Unplugged: A Guide to Disconnecting from Technology” reminds us of the importance of taking a break from our digital lives and cultivating real-world experiences. By unplugging, we can improve our mental and physical health, strengthen our relationships, and enhance our overall well-being.*

However, it is also essential to recognize the potential negative impact of social media on our lives. In this epilogue, we will explore how social media can be harmful, specifically in terms of bullying. We will examine how cyberbullying can harm our mental health and what steps we can take to protect ourselves and others from this type of abuse. While it is one of the many examples of how technology can be harmful to us, it is a crucial reminder that we must approach technology use with mindfulness and awareness and strive to create a healthy and balanced relationship with our devices and, above all, to be good stewards in the digital world.

## **#EnoughAlready End Cyberbullying**

**We’re at a crossroads.** When it comes to cyberbullying and harassment occurring regularly online, the problem is actually intensifying and happening more frequently than ever before. But, this time it’s about veterinary professionals attacking their own.

It’s important to acknowledge that it’s been long understood within the industry, that pet owners’ critique and ridicule veterinary professionals

online all the time. I know this firsthand from traveling all around the world, working one-on-one with veterinary practices, and speaking publicly.

Veterinary practices often ask me *“how to handle”* these situations as they arise, especially because they can be distracting in the workplace and personally harmful to those being attacked as well. I’ve learned that while some countries experience this issue more acutely than others, it’s still a universal problem. Veterinary professionals let me know about their experience either by speaking up, or even letting me know in private conversations, sometimes when the experiences are too painful to discuss otherwise.

I’ll continue to do my part to help veterinary practices deal with the pain, anxiety, and fiscal consequences that come from online harassment and cyberbullying. However, there’s an even more disturbing trend I’m witnessing in our profession, one that’s actually coming from within.

It’s not uncommon to find that, occasionally, veterinary professionals like to vent online. In fact, for a while I considered this to be an innocent practice that could allow some to blow off some steam. If someone had a bad day or didn’t agree with a specific policy, it’s understandable that they could be frustrated. We’ve all felt that emotion before, and sometimes we look to commiserate with others when we’re feeling this way. However, over the last year and especially the last few months, I’ve actually seen this venting take a new and dangerous twist. Now, veterinary professionals have begun venting and complaining about other veterinary professionals and prominent leaders in the industry.

I've watched this problem exacerbate in private message groups, public social media posts, viral screenshots, and dedicated Instagram channels. I've always found this to be a disturbing trend, but the more I see it, the more infuriating it becomes.

The question I'm forced to ask is: **What do we gain by bringing others in our own profession down?**

This recently became an emotional experience for me when several people who are very close to me became victims of this egregious form of public shaming. Some time ago, I was scrolling through social media content (*we can talk about the difference between active online activity and passive online activity later*) just like I normally do. When I engage online, I'm delighted to see a picture of a close family member or a friend celebrating a major life milestone or hitting a new career benchmark.

This time, however, the experience served as a rude awakening. Someone close to me, who I've known for years and who is a good-hearted person, was absolutely shredded into pieces by other veterinary professionals for attempting to help and encourage others by sharing a personal story. Just days after that, I found another post by an individual who was promising to bring industry leaders down and to force them out of the industry itself. Just days before this, I came across a newly created Instagram account with no other intention than to spread negative information about corporatization in veterinary medicine. The most disturbing thing of all that was revealed through these experiences, was the sheer level of hatred that was showcased in the comments section.

Like I mentioned, I had actually become familiar with this level of negativity before, but never from within the industry – those who were

attempting nothing other than to break the spirits and reputations of individuals who are otherwise well respected. Once I contacted some of my peers about this, I quickly realized this was happening much more frequently than it was previously and is a trend that's gaining an alarming amount of momentum.

To be entirely honest with you, what I witnessed in these experiences brought me to tears. Even in writing this, it brings me to tears. I have to wonder, what do we gain by engaging in this type of behavior? We're describing human beings when we post negatively, even though we don't know what's actually happening in their lives. All too often people are quick to single out their peers online but rarely do people reach out to share concerns privately. After all, if we truly care about one another don't we owe that courtesy to our peers?

**I'm here to say that it's time to say #EnoughAlready and that the alarming trend of cyberbullying within our industry needs to be treated seriously. But this isn't someone else's responsibility.**

**This is our problem, and we need to fix it.** What I found the most troubling when I came across these accounts, posts, and forums, was that rarely was someone posting any possible solutions. Rarely, did someone say, *"Bringing someone else down isn't going to solve the problem. Let's do something productive about this. How about trying X, Y or Z?"*

**It's simply so easy to complain instead, but what's lost in this process is the courage it requires to present a solution.** I'm not saying we all have to agree about everything. On the contrary, I think much of life's richness and intrigue involves how diverse we can be, including our opinions. But the repercussions of spreading hate are far more dangerous than many of us may be willing to admit, or even have a true sense of.

As I mentioned previously, our profession is already at the **highest risk for suicide** amongst other vocations, and increasingly, many studies are citing social media attacks as a growing factor in these suicide cases.

Research has shown that cyberbullying makes young people twice as likely to engage in **self-harm or attempt suicide**. An additional finding from PR Newsweek points out that more than a third of Generation Z (*from a survey of 1,000 individuals*) states they were quitting social media for good because 41% of them describe that it makes them feel anxious, sad, or depressed.

All of these examples and data points raise real questions for the future. Social media is a known depressant for both youth and adults alike, so why add to the issue with hateful posts and rhetoric that could directly lead to depression and suicide?

Again, I'm forced to ask: **What is the end game here? What do we accomplish when we post negatively about others without offering a solution instead?**

If we post negative content online, make hateful comments, or even allow others to do so, we're condoning behavior that is making our world, our profession, a darker, more dangerous place. Think about how many people start their day in the morning, whether consciously or not, bringing negative energy to work that they've subconsciously inherited online? How much of this hatred is passively consumed online, be it through arguments in private groups, public posts, or an ongoing cycle of both? I'm convinced that no matter how difficult it is, there is a better way.

Join me by saying **#EnoughAlready** and following the steps below to put an end to the cyberbullying and hate within our own profession:

**Instead of Being Angry, Be Productive:** You might get a temporary thrill by making a negative comment or even reading someone else's, but you're likely making yourself even more unhappy. If you're unhappy about your job, your peers, or something else, learn to use your voice in an active and engaging way.

You might be surprised at how far a professional, well-crafted letter can go when it's sent to your colleague, employer, State Association, or another local organization.

I suggest including an outline of things that could be done to make the situation better or active steps that can be taken. Great leaders in history have shown that incredible change is possible not by tearing people down, but by inspiring others.

Even when I was feeling negative about this entire situation, I chose to use my voice productively. Now you're reading this, which is helping to spread awareness about the issue.

**Don't Engage with Hateful Content:** When you witness one of the conversations we're talking about, whether it's on Facebook, Instagram, or even in-person, you don't have to engage. Your first instinct may be to chime in, but if the behavior being exhibited is truly destructive, you may be brought down in the process.

If something is truly hateful and dangerous, you can Report the post, which may be a good idea, and won't involve you in the conversation. You can also simply Unfollow posts, log out of the app, and walk away.

One of the trickiest components of this entire issue is that anger can elicit more anger. That's just another reason why opting not to engage can often be your best bet. If you're deciding what to do, ask yourself, *"Does this post make me feel happy or hopeful?"* If the answer is, *"No,"* then it's probably best to walk away or channel your energy in a productive way. Simply say to yourself, enough already.

**What Happens When You Need to Vent?: Venting can actually be healthy when done appropriately.** We've all had those acute moments of being upset about something. If we vent to a friend, sometimes we feel better almost immediately. Finding productive ways to deal with frustration, sadness, and anger (*this can also include spending time in nature, meditating, exercising, #unplugging, or other*) will give negative emotions less power over you.

When you do need to vent, venting on social media isn't usually the place to do it: do it offline. When you vent online it attracts negativity (*this can also work in reverse when you post hopeful content*) and can compound the issue at hand.

When you vent negatively, it can actually prolong your own recovery process. Even when I originally posted about **#EnoughAlready** on my own public and private social platforms, the comments that rolled in over the course of the week caused me to focus on the issue for even longer. Thankfully, all positive responses.

However, I'm making a conscious choice to create awareness and put my own advice into action by offering positive, actionable steps in this epilogue.

**What Happens When You're a Victim or if Online Negativity is Impacting You?:** If this is the case, call someone and speak out about your situation. Since I've become an advocate about these

situations, I've received tons of messages from people who have been victims of these attacks by their own colleagues online. Although those experiences were damaging, many of these individuals were able to cope by speaking to a trusted friend or peer.

Here is an example of an email I received recently from a Veterinarian brave enough to share her story with me (*several pieces of information were redacted to allow the sender to remain anonymous*):

"I also wanted to say a huge THANK YOU for **#EnoughAlready**. I have unfortunately been on the receiving end of vet bashing (*veterinary professional to veterinary professional cyberbullying on social media*). They spread lies about me and tried to sabotage my practice. This resulted in clients starting cruel posts on local Facebook groups calling me names and threatening me. It's been a year now, and I am much better off. The first 3 months were pretty terrible. I had to do a lot of soul searching during that time but made it through. Unfortunately, I have also known many that did not. Thanks again for making a difference by letting everyone know (*about*) **#EnoughAlready**."

Sometimes, you need more professional resources to give you insight and help you through the issue. If that's the case and you're experiencing anxiety, depression, bullying, self-harm, or loneliness, you can easily connect with a live, trained Crisis Counselor. You can seek this help by text message if you reach out to the Crisis Text Line or [www.crisistextline.org](http://www.crisistextline.org), you can talk to someone by calling the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** by calling **+1-800-273-8255**, or dialing 988.

If you know someone who is affected, the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** is available to you, too. This is a great resource that can help you to determine whether a friend or colleague is in need of professional intervention.

**A Better Choice is Possible:** Even though these issues are troubling, there's a lot that can be done. I've learned to disconnect from Social Media at least several times a year, which is a



tremendous boon to my physical and emotional well-being. I recommend trying to #unplug at least once to see if it can work for you too. It has dramatically positive impacts for people of different ages, professions, and across all walks of life. You can even start learning to take breaks from technology now that you've completed this book.

Learning to unplug is life-changing. If you haven't unplugged before, you might feel like this brave professional that sent me this email:

*"I went to your website and read the "unplugged" references. Suddenly I found myself crying (I NEVER cry). I need to do this! I've been aware for some time now that I'm totally caught up in the "I have to be available 24/7" and "I have to respond ASAP" trap but have been unable to break free. Can't wait to read more and start practicing your advice. It may just save my life!"*

It's not just healthy to unplug from work, but also the constant negativity that is often associated with social media.

## **#EnoughAlready**

To everyone reading this, I'm here to tell you that a better choice is possible. Let's stand together and put an end to this constant flow of negativity occurring online occurring from within our own profession.

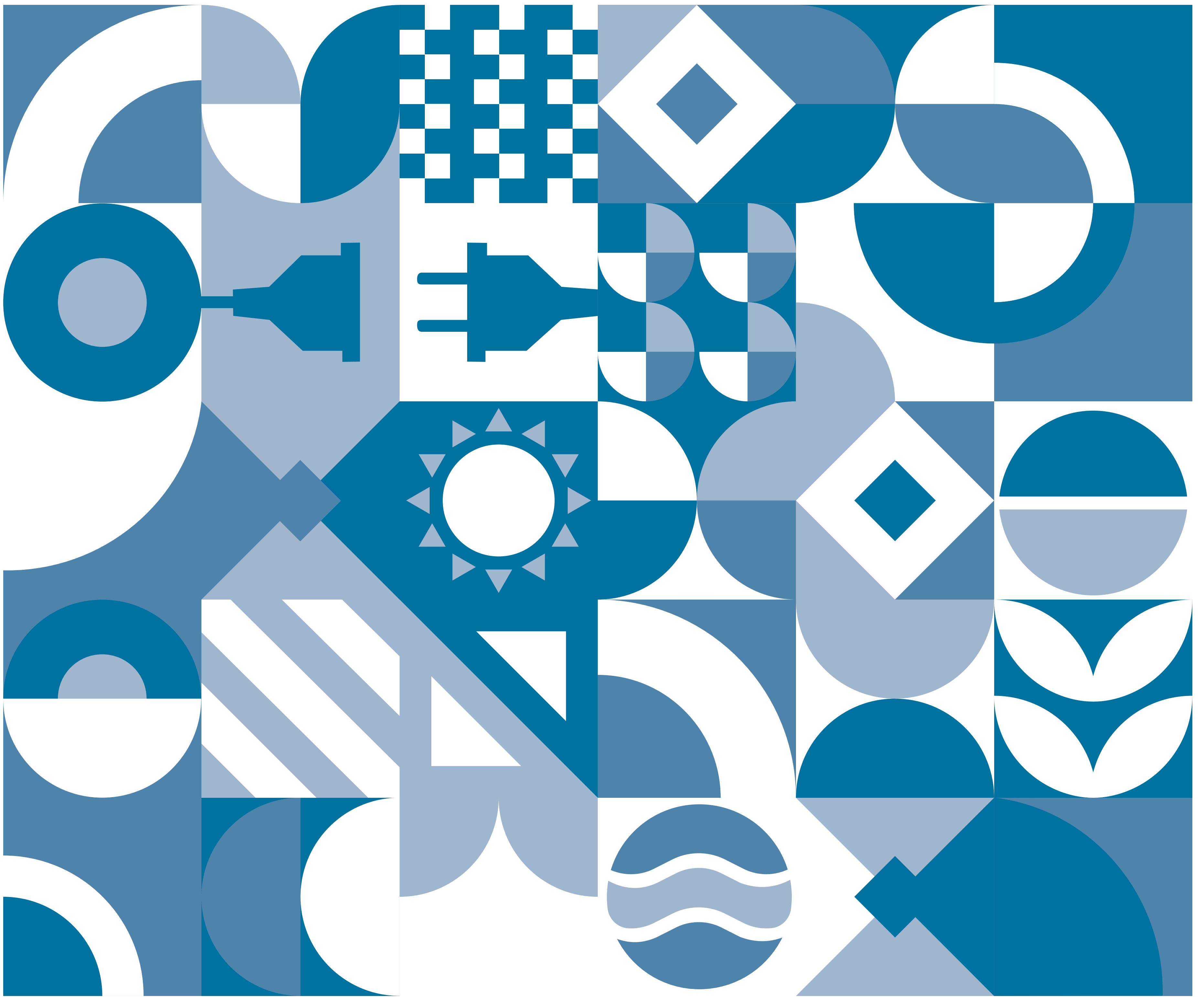
We have so much to gain by lifting each other up and bringing the best out in one another. We have so much to lose if we give in to anger, jealousy, and hatred instead.

**Stand with me and say #EnoughAlready.**

**It's our turn to take a stand.**

# Thanks for Reading

To continue to read about Eric's approach to unplugging you can follow his ongoing journey by visiting [ericgarciafl.com/unplugged](https://ericgarciafl.com/unplugged)



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