

FROM THE AGE OF REASON TO THE AGE OF DISTRACTION

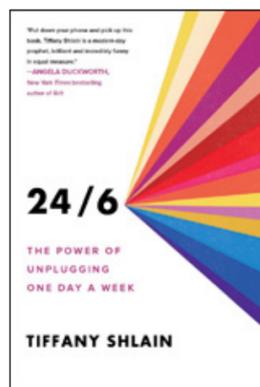
When is technology too much? Author Tiffany Shlain shares her thoughts on our collective and ubiquitous addiction to our tablets, cellphones and computers

WRITTEN BY CECE M. SCOTT

It is bizarre to grasp the undeniable fact that in the last 25 years, the Internet and social media have become such an integrated, intrinsic part of our collective modus operandi that we have become completely and utterly hooked. We chat on our phones in the car, text in the bathroom, bring our devices to the dining room table — like a side plate waiting to go off. And then, of course, there is the furtively (sometimes even unabashedly) searching, Googling, tweeting, posting and liking under the covers in our bedroom. What is scary and actually concerning is that our technological devices have become so integral to our lives, so 24-7, that constant access has become akin to the actual physicality of breathing. Plug it in; breathe; log on; breathe; search and surf; breathe; text and like; breathe; take a selfie; breathe; post; breathe. The only action that is not a constant is the logging off from all of our devices — computers, tablets and cellphones. And that is the issue that author Tiffany Shlain, Emmy-nominated filmmaker and founder of the Webby Awards (popularly known as the Oscars of the Web), addresses in her new book, *24/6: The Power of Unplugging One Day a Week* (Gallery Books, 2019).

With a career that has been deeply immersed in technology, Shlain's overriding interest is centred in the connectivity that technology facilitates. "I am excited about the potential of how technology connects us with people and ideas," Shlain says. "I never imagined that all this potential would disconnect us with the people and ideas that are happening right in front of us. I love technology; I just don't love it 24/7."

With a resume that spans the making of over 30 films — many about living life with meaning and purpose, and the neuroscience of creativity —



24/6: Taking a break from technology can enhance our spiritual, emotional and physical well-being

Shlain, who *Newsweek* named "one of the women shaping the 21st century," has 80 awards and distinctions for her films and work, with an inclusion in the Albert Einstein Foundation's upcoming book *Genius: 100 Visions of the Future*. Her original series, *The Future Starts Here*, was nominated for an Emmy in *New Approaches: Arts, Lifestyle, Culture*.

Having delivered keynote speeches at Google, Harvard, NASA, TEDWomen and TEDMED (not to mention advising the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on a speech about Internet freedom), there is no question that Shlain has every reason, every mandate and every excuse to be a devotee of the 24-7 connectivity tsunami.

However, 10 years ago, a series of seismic events changed how Shlain viewed life — her powerlessness over her all-encompassing, always-on screen time, and her lack of mindfulness or being present to those around her.

"My dad, Leonard, an important figure in my life

and who I was extremely close to, was diagnosed with brain cancer and given nine months to live. That same week, I found out I was pregnant. It was a very intense nine months. With a life growing inside of me, I reflected deeply on how I wanted to spend my time. It seemed everywhere I looked, people were on their phones instead of being present with the people that were right in front of them. When Dad passed away, a person who, when you were talking to him, made you feel like you were the most important person in the room, my husband Ken [Goldberg, a professor of robotics at UC Berkley] and I started turning off our screens one day a week for what we call our Technology Shabbat. We have done it now for 10 years and it has really changed our lives."

The motivating idea around unplugging for Shlain and Goldberg was twofold. Goldberg had lived in Israel where Shabbat was a weekly tradition and one that he had participated in until the advent of the iPhone. Partial versions of Shabbat were practised by the couple, including Friday night dinners and doing their best not to work on Saturdays. But the invention of the iPhone changed everything. Suddenly, it was a 24/7 world. But after participating in a national day of unplugging, the couple decided they felt so good and present without screens for Shabbat that they never stopped doing it. "It was such a beautiful feeling to be truly present," Shlain says. "It expands the sense of time. It makes me feel much more productive; much more creative; I laugh a lot more; I feel much more grateful. I even read in a different way. I feel more connected with myself, my husband and my kids. The list goes on and on."

Before you pooh-pooh the idea that your kids would ever consider ungluing their device from

Tiffany Shlain: shaping the 21st century



★

"I THINK THAT IF YOU USE TECHNOLOGY MINDFULLY, NOT MINDLESSLY, IT IS A GOOD START. USE IT INSTEAD OF LETTING IT USE YOU"

their memory-phoned hand, it should be noted that Shlain's daughters, Odessa, 16, and Blooma, 10, both love doing Tech Shabbat and are strong supporters of it. "You should hear Odessa talk about our Tech Shabbat," Shlain says. "She is so happy to take a break, to not have to do homework, to take a break from posting; from liking. It is not healthy to be connected 24/7. The traditional Shabbat, with its 3,000 years of history, has some deep wisdom tied to its day of rest. I don't come at Shabbat from a religious place; I consider it brilliant wisdom that can be adopted for and by everyone. Our Tech Shabbat has become everyone in the family's favourite day of the week."

To that end, *24/6: The Power of Unplugging One Day a Week* offers a list of prompts and suggestions — tangible ideas to improve one's lifestyle, ideas

around creating new traditions and concrete ways to set boundaries and reconnect both with oneself and with family and friends. Ideas for having fun without screens are listed by age categories, with specific activities identified for kids, those who are 18+ as well as seniors. Shlain also includes ways to maximize the physical and mental benefits garnered from the Tech Shabbat over the other six days of the week. "I think getting someone to do a Tech Shabbat with you is helpful," Shlain says. "Technology is viewed as something that makes things faster and more productive. But if we truly take a concrete day off, we can look at rest as a technology; it would be a wonderful flip in the way we think about it."

Think it's a lot of 'much ado about nothing'? Take a moment now — seriously, right now, before you read that last text that just pinged, or that last email that just appeared in your inbox — and put down your phone, face first. Then count to 30 Mississippi, real slow, like you used to do playing hide-and-seek. Are you itching to see what that text said? What that important-looking email is all about? Is it really that important to interrupt your

face time with people who are right in front of you to interact with virtual friends?

While technology is important and is definitive as to how we live our lives in the 21st century, technology addiction is real. "I think that we are all addicted to our phones," Shlain says. "I don't think it is healthy for anyone to be online all the time. You can go down the rabbit hole and waste a lot of time. But a Tech Shabbat is not about a day without your phone. Instead it is a day when you get to do all the things you wish you could do. You fill the day with all the things you wish you had time for and it becomes the day you run toward every week. I love the Internet, and I think that if you use technology mindfully, not mindlessly, it is a good start. Use it instead of letting it use you."

Known for her moxie (a guiding word in her life), distinctive hats (an influence from her grandfather) and her bright red lips (there is a great little anecdote about her trademark look in the book), Shlain says, "I feel like I am ready to go when I have my hat on."

To obtain a copy of Shlain's book, go to www.24sixlife.com.