

A horizontal green banner with a large, white, stylized 'G' icon on the left side. The rest of the banner is a solid green color.

## When Did We Stop Participating in Life?

By Brooke Layman, Consultant

When was the last time you unplugged? I am talking about TRULY unplugging. No phone, no TV, no internet, no computer, no email (gasp!)...

In the world that we live in today, it's almost impossible to TRULY unplug. There are dings, pings, rings and all kinds of things that are vying for our attention. Even as I'm sitting here writing this article with my Mom visiting from out of town, two of her devices are going off simultaneously! Ding! Ping!

I have been contemplating the concept of truly unplugging for some time. When I asked myself the same question, "when was the last time I TRULY unplugged," the first image that came to mind was a younger version of myself riding her bike in a neighborhood cul-de-sac, pretending she was some kind of superhero, turning blades of grass into priceless objects. But of course, when I was that age it was easy to unplug! We didn't have computers, cell phones or email. My parents limited my brother and my television viewing time to one hour a day. We didn't have the option of pulling out a tablet on a road trip or a flight. We were forced to BE unplugged and it was fine because we didn't know any better.

But, I am a product of society and I would be lying if I said that I haven't enjoyed the many technological advances that have surfaced since I was that small girl on her bike. I didn't, however, really stop to think about how technology has changed the way that I am able to experience and participate in life until much more recently.

Disconnecting from the dings and pings is something that I consistently urge others in my life to do. From participants in my seminars, to friends with phones that light up when they receive a text, and yes, even asking my Mom to try and go without the sounds on her devices for a little while. If we think about the amount of time it takes for us to refocus every time we are interrupted by a notification on our smartphone for Facebook, Twitter or Linked in, distracted by a pop up notifying us of every email that comes into our inbox, jolted out of our thought process by an IM showing up on our screen, etc., etc., we become very aware of how much time we are losing every day. Consider that every time we get interrupted by one of these pings or dings it can take up to 25 minutes to refocus on what we were doing, thinking or even saying.<sup>1</sup>

Just for fun, the next time you are having a conversation with someone who has their phone in front of them, watch what happens when a notification shows up on their screen mid-sentence. See if you can determine how long it takes them to regain their focus on what they were saying before they were interrupted.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/opinion/sunday/a-focus-on-distraction.html>

This past holiday season, I was out to dinner at a very popular family restaurant. I began to look around and was dumbfounded to see how many families were having their meal with a side of smartphone. Parents and children all peering down at their phones in between forkfuls of food, barely having any conversation. And the families that were having conversation all had their phones sitting beside their plates facing up at them AND had the sound turned on! How in the world could these individuals truly be present and focused with their loved ones with all of these dings, pings and rings?

It might be time to take a look at the habits we have created around our devices. We may need to stop and realize that we are not being present. We might realize that we haven't been participating in life.

What does participating in life really mean?

When was the last time you left your house without your smartphone (on purpose)? When was the last time you spent an afternoon with a loved one and didn't have your devices turned on? When was the last time you experienced life for what it was right then and there in that moment?

Perhaps, for some people, participating in life does mean that they share it with their devices. We are living in an era where technology is almost mandatory. But consider this...

Participating in life might just be bigger than pictures, devices, texts, calls and status updates. Participating in life might be bigger than making sure that you are available to connect with anyone at any given moment. Participating in life might be about being with yourself in an exact moment so that you can experience what you are experiencing! That means allowing all of your senses to participate as well.

Studies have shown that memories are directly attached to our senses. Sight, smell, taste and sound have the ability to create the beginning of a memory in our brain. Think about the smell of your local bakery or the taste of your grandmother's cooking. When you recollect these senses, images are conjured in your brain<sup>2</sup>.

By allowing the distractions to interrupt us, it's possible that we are hindering the creation of strong, lasting memories within our brains. Some might argue that with today's technology and the ability to document our lives in pictures, we are actually creating more memories this way. But pictures can be misplaced, lost, deleted and destroyed while memories last a lifetime.

A colleague of mine recently shared that her 11 year old daughter had been grounded from her phone for a weekend and in that time she was so much more engaged and creative than normal. The entire family benefited from her punishment as a result, and as a whole they had a ton of fun together and made some incredible family memories! Because of this experience, my colleague has now implemented a 2 hour "no-phone" rule every evening.

It is possible that we feel more connected when we have our devices with us, constantly letting us know that we are not alone; but consider that it also might be possible that we are distancing ourselves from the people who we are closest to by not participating in the present moment with them.

That being said, I encourage you to try and tap into your own little-girl-on-her-bike image and remember what it was like to truly BE unplugged. Tap into that joyful, creative, part of yourself with all of your senses engaged. Consider how you might be able to start a new unplugging habit of your own; create amazing memories and go participate in life!

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<sup>2</sup> <http://sites.tufts.edu/emotiononthebrain/2014/10/09/emotion-and-our-senses/>  
<http://www.nature.com/news/2004/040531/full/news040524-12.html>