Tech gadgets can be addictive

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I've been thinking I need to take a break from technology. Not an extended one, mind you. I'm not planning on becoming some latter-day Thoreau and retreating to my own Walden Pond sans laptop, TV and smart-phone.

No, I'm thinking about something much smaller. Resisting the urge to check my e-mail on my phone, say. Finding something else to do when the TV's not on at night than retreat to my computer for some Web surfing or game playing. Focusing on the people in my life, rather than the gadgets.

This notion of creating some space between me and technology has been welling up within me for a while now. But it came to the surface earlier this month while I was on vacation. We spent the week at home, in part to relax before my son started kindergarten.

At work, of course, I typically spend almost my entire day in front of my computer. I'm constantly checking my e-mail, responding to instant messages, surfing the Web or playing around with various software programs.

When I'm away from my desk, I'm still tied to technology. I have my iPhone with me at all times and use it to check my work e-mail, navigate to out-of-office meetings, listen to music and news -- or play the occasional game.

But even on vacation, I felt an urge to be engaged with something

electronic. I reflexively pulled my iPhone out of my pocket, even when having breakfast with my son or when we went as a family to Children's Fairyland.

Unfortunately, that compulsion wasn't unusual for me.

As recently as a year ago, after we got the kids to sleep, my wife and I would wind down by watching TV. Now both of us are often on our iPhones, doing our own thing, completely disengaged from each other.

We're not unusual. Every day, it seems, more and more folks are walking around with a [Bluetooth headset](#) in their ears and [smart-phones](#) in their hands, yakking or typing away, oblivious to the world around them.

That's not to say there's anything inherently wrong with technology or [gadgets](#). I love them. I love playing around with them. And I love their benefits.

Facebook has put me back in contact with scads of old friends I'd lost touch with over the years. My smart-phone helps me find the perfect nearby restaurant when I'm on the road. And I revel in conquering the world in strategic video games such as "Civilization."

But as much as technology can connect us with other people, it can also isolate us from the world around us and the people right next to us.

Reading a newspaper Web site on my iPhone while sitting next to my son may seem no different from when my dad used to read a real newspaper while I was eating breakfast as a kid. But the iPhone tends to be a lot more engrossing and addictive than a physical newspaper -- and not just because the latter keeps getting thinner.

I can peruse hundreds of newspapers on my iPhone, seeking out those

stories and topics I'm most interested in. If that gets dull, I can check my e-mail. If there's nothing there to grab my attention, there's always my Facebook app or a game. In short, it's hard to pull away. And once you're entrapped, it's hard to pay attention to anything else.

Likewise, there may not seem much difference between my wife and me watching TV together and playing on our iPhones at the same time. In both cases, we're more engaged with a screen than each other, but watching TV is a shared experience. We can talk about a show afterward -- or even while it's still on. But we are sharing nothing if she's surfing the Web and I'm playing a game.

So I've started to take some small breaks from technology. For the most part, I didn't check my work e-mail while I was on vacation. I had to comb through a ton of messages when I got back, but I had given myself more time to play with my family.

And when my son has dawdled over a meal in recent days, I've ignored my reflexive urge to pull out my iPhone.

I'm not sure that my son noticed. But I sure did.

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