



HIGHTOWER

Westchester



Growing Up Digital: Empowering Youth to Look Up and Thrive

By Susan Reynolds

There is an escalating mental health crisis amongst teens and young adults that began long before the pandemic. Social isolation and loneliness became a norm for these youth; the necessity of spending most of their days with technology for both online learning and socialization further exacerbated the problem. While there are several interconnected causes for this mental health epidemic, living in a 24/7 digitally connected world with the comparison culture of social media and access to never ending news of world crises contributes to and amplifies the issues.

What happens when you choose to sleep, study and socialize without your phone and the social media it delivers? When you add in moments of time in silence and stillness, you are able to reset the nervous system, which is on high alert from the ongoing external stimulation of dings, pings, and notifications.

Before I founded LookUp, an organization that helps youth leaders create solutions to digital addiction, I spoke to parents and teachers about the problem and what research has been telling us about the importance of managing one's own use of technology. These are the top conclusions and recommendations that are just as useful for adults as they are for young people.

01 SLEEP TIME

About 68% of teens keep their phone within reach when they sleep, while 36% check their phones in the middle of the night. The phones interrupt the sleep and that can lead to sleep deprivation, which can mask itself as anxiety or depression. Many people claim that they need their phones for their alarm clock, but one can put their phone across the room in airplane mode, thus keeping the alarm clock without the proximity to let it disrupt sleep.

02 WORKING & STUDYING

Do you work and study with your phone next to you? Did you know that the closer your phone is to you, the lower your working memory and fluid intelligence are. A 2017 study titled ["Brain Drain, the Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity,"](#) was eye-opening to many of the students (and adults) I spoke to – and this study was conducted with phones that were turned off. It is indicative of the powerful influence just the sight of our phone evokes for distraction.

03 SOCIAL SITUATIONS

When you are with friends and family, do you pull out your phone to respond to a text, check a fact, or scroll social media? About 86% of Americans do just that. “Phubbing,” aka phone snubbing, contributes to lower relationship quality, trust and empathy, as found in a 2012 [study](#). Youth share that when they feel awkward or uncomfortable with others it is easy to pick up their phones instead of moving through the feelings. Families often create phone free zones and times in their home to facilitate more face-to-face communication, but it is harder for youth to create among their friends.

04 SOLITUDE

How often do you spend time in silence and stillness? Cal Newport wrote a book, [Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World](#), in which he defines solitude deprivation as a state in which you spend close to zero time alone with your own thoughts and free from input from other minds. The youth generation is said to be suffering from a lack of solitude that is often needed for problem solving, increasing creativity and enhancing imagination.

These are adult solutions for a youth culture, and while these are important practices for a variety of reasons, youth often listen to other young people more openly and enthusiastically about ways to manage one’s technology. In addition, most adults today did not grow up with social media or smartphones, so it makes sense to turn to the youth themselves to learn what it’s like for them living in the digital world.



In research for a book, I've collected youth solutions to the challenges and mental health dangers of growing up digital. Here are a few of their stories and suggestions.

POWERING DOWN

When Maddie Freeman was in high school in Littleton, Colorado, she lost several peers to death by suicide. The effect on Maddie was profound, as she had suffered from anxiety and depression herself. Recognizing the role that social media had in these deaths, she became a mental health advocate and created [NoSo November](#), a month-long challenge to partially or completely eliminate social media for November. As a LookUp Innovator, Maddie created a [short film](#) with Jeff Orłowski, the director of *The Social Dilemma*, a powerful documentary about the harms of social media to youth mental health, democracy and humanity in general. Maddie, now a college student, uses the film to engage others in this annual campaign.

POWER OF SOLITUDE & MINDFULNESS

Another college student, Tyrek Washington, is developing a journal that asks us to spend time in solitude, with pen and paper, and reflect on one's thoughts. He so aptly describes the solutions to solitude deprivation. Without time in silence and solitude away from the external stimulation of the dings and pings from digital devices, there may come a time when we cannot withstand the power of the algorithms telling us what we think.

Dhisha Kukalaluntia speaks to the power of mindfulness in the digital world, with her website [Positivity 101](#). Mindfulness is an anecdote to the digital distraction of 24/7 connectivity, pulling one's attention away from one's intentions. When we practice living in the present moment, we have more training to stay focused on the people in one's life as opposed to those on the screen.

POWER OF PURPOSE

Larissa May recognized the impact social media was having on her mental health when she was a college student. Committed to exposing the harms, she created a movement, [#halfthestory](#) to complete the picture of one's real life. After seven years advocating for a healthy relationship with technology, Larissa (Larz) claims she's found her calling and purpose in this work and is establishing an Advocacy Academy that trains youth to become part of the coalition to bring change and regulation of the digital world through legislative action.

Aliza Kopans began her digital wellness journey as an intern at the [Screentime Action Network](#) and today has moved on to advocacy and storytelling through [Technically Politics](#). Here she films classmates and peers on their relationships with social media in the hopes of sharing them with legislators and lawmakers in the quest for technology regulation for youth under 18.

ABOUT SUSAN REYNOLDS

Susan Reynolds has over 20 years of experience in digital wellbeing, youth leadership and mindfulness. In 2019 she co-founded LookUp.live to discover, empower, and mobilize youth leaders who are taking action to raise awareness, inspire, and design a healthier, more inclusive, and responsible digital world.



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