

Research Paper

Digital Detox for Mental Health: Reconceptualising an Ancient Practice for Modern India

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ABSTRACT

The exponential growth in digital device usage across India has led to emerging concerns about mental health impacts, particularly among young adults. This conceptual paper examines "digital detox" as a mental health intervention by situating it within existing psychological frameworks while acknowledging unique Indian cultural contexts. Drawing parallels between ancient contemplative traditions and modern psychological approaches, we propose a conceptual model that frames digital detox not as a novel intervention but as a contemporary application of established self-regulation principles. The DIGITAL-BALANCE framework offers counselling psychologists a structured approach for conceptualizing and implementing interventions that address problematic digital usage patterns. By integrating traditional Indian concepts of mindfulness with contemporary psychological theory, this framework provides a culturally relevant approach for addressing digital wellbeing in the Indian context. The paper concludes with implications for counselling psychology practice and suggestions for adapting the framework across diverse settings.

Keywords: *Digital detox, conceptual framework, mental health, India, counselling psychology, mindfulness, self-regulation*

The digital transformation sweeping across India has fundamentally altered everyday life, education, and social connections. With smartphone penetration projected to reach 1 billion users by 2026, India stands at the crossroads of technological advancement and emerging mental health challenges (Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology, 2023; National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, 2023). Young adults, particularly those in educational settings, demonstrate the highest rates of digital immersion, often with insufficient awareness of potential psychological impacts.

This digital immersion presents a paradox: while technology offers unprecedented access to information, connection, and opportunity, excessive or problematic usage patterns correlate with increasing mental health concerns including anxiety, depression, attention difficulties, and sleep disturbances (Sohn et al., 2019). In response, the concept of "digital detox"

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Received: May 13, 2025; Revision Received: March 27, 2026; Accepted: March 31, 2026

defined as intentional, temporary abstinence from digital devices has gained popularity as a potential intervention.

Despite growing interest in digital detox, its conceptualization often lacks theoretical grounding within established psychological frameworks. Popular discourse frequently presents digital detox as a novel solution, neglecting its connections to foundational psychological principles and ancient contemplative practices that have long addressed self-regulation and attention management.

This paper offers a reconceptualization of digital detox, examining it not as a revolutionary approach but as a contemporary application of established psychological principles. By situating digital detox within both ancient Indian contemplative traditions and modern psychological theory, we develop an integrated framework specifically relevant to the Indian context.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Digital Detox: Beyond Novelty

The term "digital detox" gained mainstream attention in the 2010s, often presented as an innovative response to technological oversaturation. However, this framing obscures important connections to established psychological constructs. We propose that digital detox represents not a novel intervention but a repackaging and application of fundamental psychological principles including:

- **Self-regulation theory:** Digital detox fundamentally addresses self-regulatory capacities the ability to monitor and modulate attention, emotions, and behaviour in service of valued goals. Self-regulation theory posits that these capacities can become depleted through continuous effort, particularly when resisting immediate rewards for longer-term benefits (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007).
- **Environmental modification:** Principles of behaviour change have long emphasized environmental restructuring as a potent intervention. Digital detox employs this approach by temporarily removing or limiting environmental triggers (devices) that prompt automatic engagement (Beck & Haigh, 2014).
- **Attentional restoration:** Attention restoration theory suggests that directed attention is a limited resource requiring periodic restoration through engagement with non-demanding environments. Digital detox creates conditions for this restoration by removing continuous attentional demands from notifications, updates, and information processing (Kaplan, 1995).
- **Habit formation and disruption:** Habits form through repeated pairing of contextual cues with behaviours that yield rewards. Digital detox interrupts these established patterns, creating space for conscious choice rather than automatic response (Young, 2004).

Figure 1. Conceptual Foundations of Digital Detox.

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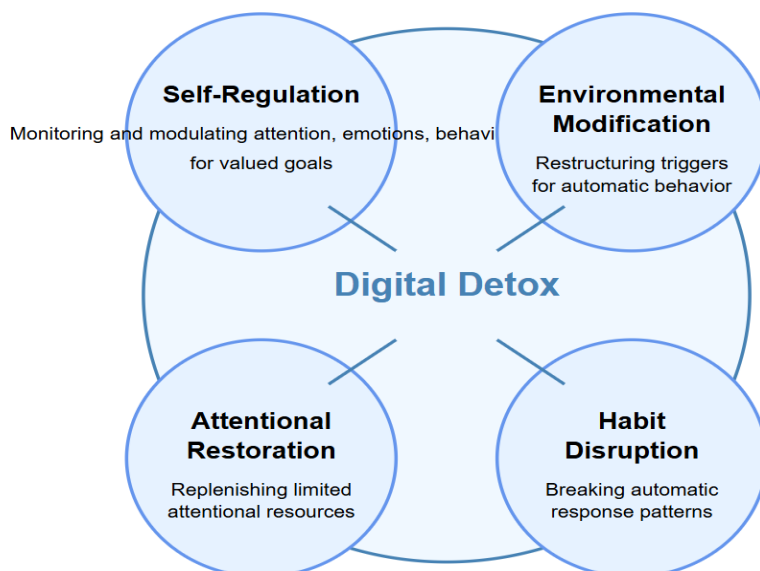


Figure 1 illustrates how digital detox integrates four established psychological principles: self-regulation, environmental modification, attentional restoration, and habit disruption. By recognizing these foundational connections, counselling psychologists can approach digital detox not as a trendy wellness practice but as an application of core psychological principles to contemporary challenges.

Indian Philosophical Traditions and Digital Wellbeing

India's contemplative traditions offer rich conceptual resources for understanding and addressing digital dependency. Several ancient practices share striking parallels with modern digital detox approaches:

- **Pratyahara:** The yogic concept of sensory withdrawal of deliberately turning attention inward by temporarily disengaging from external stimuli that offers a philosophical foundation for digital detox. Just as yogic practitioners withdraw from sensory stimulation to enhance awareness, digital detox creates conditions for attentional recalibration through technological withdrawal (Kumar, 2004).
- **Vipassana and mindfulness:** Traditional vipassana meditation emphasizes non-judgmental observation of thoughts and sensations as they arise and pass. This practice develops meta-cognitive awareness the ability to observe one's thoughts without automatic reaction which directly addresses the habitual, often unconscious nature of digital engagement (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).
- **Brahmacharya:** While traditionally associated with sexual restraint, the broader concept of brahmacharya involves mindful use of energy and selective engagement with stimulating influences. This principle offers a framework for understanding digital consumption not as inherently problematic but requiring conscious boundaries (Kumar, 2004).
- **Tapas:** The discipline of self-regulation and voluntary discomfort for spiritual growth parallels the intentional discomfort often experienced during digital restriction. This framing transforms withdrawal symptoms into opportunities for growth rather than obstacles to overcome (Vivekananda, 1982).

Figure 2. Parallels Between Indian Philosophical Traditions and Modern Digital Detox Applications.

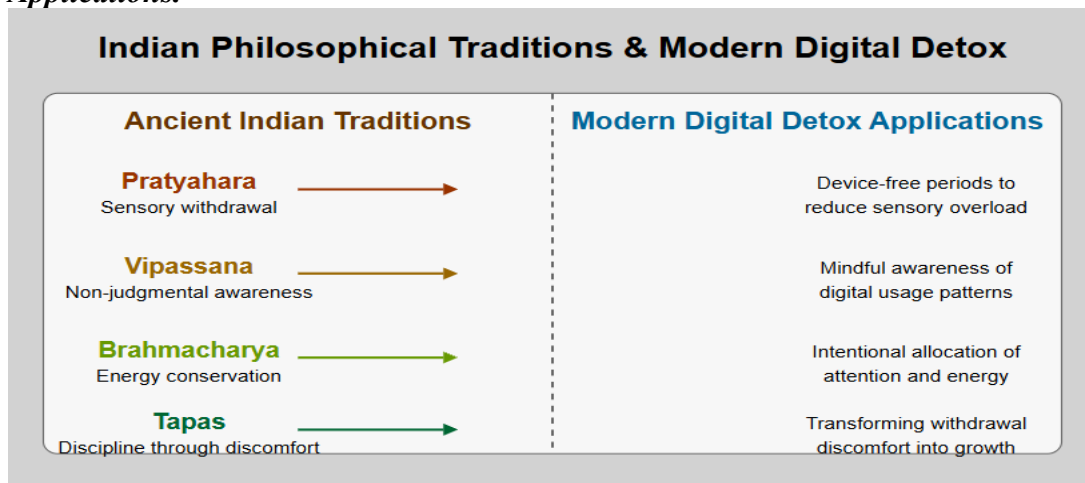


Figure 2 illustrates how ancient Indian contemplative concepts align with contemporary digital detox practices. These indigenous concepts provide culturally resonant frameworks for understanding digital detox not as Western importation but as contemporary application of principles deeply rooted in Indian philosophical traditions.

The DIGITAL-BALANCE Framework

Building on these conceptual foundations, we propose the DIGITAL-BALANCE framework as a structured approach for conceptualizing digital detox interventions in counselling psychology practice. This framework integrates traditional contemplative approaches with contemporary psychological theory, offering a comprehensive model for addressing problematic digital engagement:

D- Discernment Developing awareness of one's relationship with technology through systematic reflection on usage patterns, motivations, and impacts. This parallels the metacognitive awareness cultivated in both vipassana meditation and cognitive-behavioural approaches (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Beck & Haigh, 2014).

I- Intention Clarifying personal values and purposes for digital engagement/disengagement, aligning technology use with meaningful goals rather than habitual patterns. This draws from both acceptance and commitment therapy and the yogic concept of sankalpa (intentional resolve) (Hayes et al., 2011; Kumar, 2004).

G- Gradual Implementation Recognizing that sustainable change typically occurs incrementally rather than through radical restriction. This principle acknowledges the neurobiological basis of habit formation and change, suggesting that gradual implementation enhances sustainability (Sharma et al., 2021).

I- Integration Embedding digital awareness practices into daily routines rather than treating detox as an isolated intervention. This principle draws from behaviour change research suggesting that contextual integration enhances maintenance of new patterns (Young, 2004).

T- Triggers Identification Systematically identifying environmental, emotional, and cognitive triggers for problematic digital engagement. This behavioural analysis approach helps individuals recognize and modify antecedents to automatic usage (Beck & Haigh, 2014).

A- Alternative Activities Developing meaningful alternatives to digital engagement that fulfil similar psychological needs (connection, stimulation, escape) in healthier ways. This principle builds on behavioural activation approaches and Indian concepts of sattvic (balanced) lifestyle (Kumar, 2004).

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L- Limits Establishment Creating clear, personalized boundaries around digital usage based on individual patterns and needs rather than arbitrary restrictions. This acknowledges the importance of autonomy in sustainable behaviour change (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

B- Balance Approach Emphasizing balanced engagement rather than complete abstinence, recognizing technology's beneficial aspects while addressing problematic patterns. This middle-path approach reflects both Buddhist philosophical principles and harm-reduction approaches in psychology (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

A- Accountability Systems Establishing supportive structures for maintaining digital awareness, whether through social connections, tracking methods, or therapeutic relationships. This recognizes the social dimension of behaviour change (Sharma et al., 2021).

L- Learning Cycle Approaching digital management as an ongoing process of experimentation, reflection, and adjustment rather than a fixed endpoint. This principle draws from experiential learning theory and yoga's emphasis on practice (abhyasa) as continual refinement (Sharma et al., 2021).

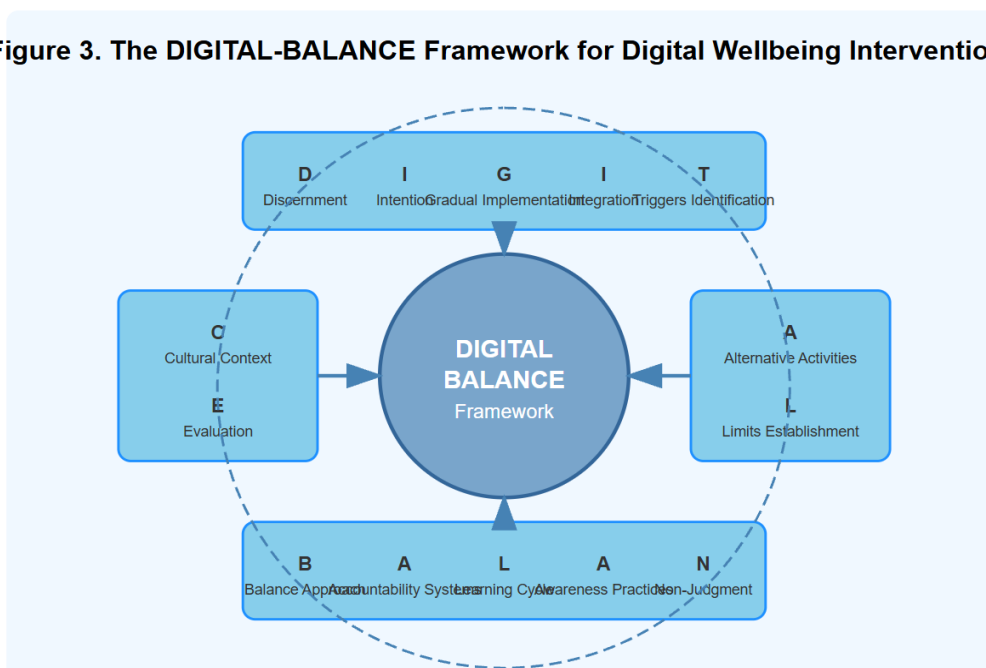
A- Awareness Practices Incorporating formal and informal mindfulness practices that enhance present-moment awareness during digital engagement and daily activities. This integrates traditional contemplative practices with contemporary mindfulness-based interventions (Gupta et al., 2023).

N- Non-Judgment Cultivating compassionate awareness of digital habits without self-criticism, recognizing that patterns develop in response to genuine psychological needs. This principle incorporates both Buddhist concepts of compassion and the therapeutic alliance in Western psychology (Hayes et al., 2011).

C- Cultural Context Acknowledging how cultural factors influence digital engagement patterns and intervention approaches, particularly within India's diverse social contexts. This principle recognizes that digital behaviours are embedded within broader cultural systems (Mehta et al., 2023).

E - Evaluation Regularly assessing the impacts of digital usage patterns and modification attempts across multiple domains of wellbeing. This principle incorporates evidence-based practice's emphasis on ongoing assessment and adjustment (Mehta et al., 2023).

Figure 3. The DIGITAL-BALANCE Framework for Digital Wellbeing Interventions



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Figure 3 presents the components of the framework and their interconnections, illustrating how each element contributes to a comprehensive approach to digital wellbeing. This framework provides counselling psychologists a structured approach for conceptualizing interventions that address problematic digital usage while acknowledging both ancient wisdom traditions and contemporary psychological science.

Cultural Considerations in the Indian Context

The implementation of digital detox interventions requires careful consideration of India's unique cultural context. Several factors warrant particular attention:

Collectivistic Values and Digital Connection

Indian cultural contexts often emphasize family connectedness and collective identity, with digital platforms serving important functions in maintaining these connections. Digital detox approaches developed in individualistic Western contexts may inadvertently neglect these values if emphasizing personal boundaries without acknowledging relational responsibilities (Chandra et al., 2023).

A culturally sensitive approach recognizes that:

- Family expectations for digital availability may reflect important cultural values rather than simple interruption.
- Complete disconnection may conflict with collective responsibilities.
- Digital platforms often serve as crucial links to extended family networks, particularly for those living away from home.

Interventions should therefore focus on negotiating balanced connectivity rather than promoting individualistic boundaries.

Economic and Access Considerations

Digital access in India varies dramatically across socioeconomic lines, with many experiencing what might be termed "involuntary digital detox" through limited access. For individuals who have recently gained digital access, recommendations to limit usage may seem insensitive to privilege disparities (World Health Organization, 2015).

Culturally sensitive approaches acknowledge:

- Digital access often represents hard-won social mobility.
- Usage patterns may reflect necessary resource-sharing (shared devices, limited data).
- Educational and occupational advancement increasingly requires digital engagement.

Interventions should therefore focus on quality of engagement rather than quantity alone.

Academic and Occupational Pressures

India's competitive educational and professional environments create unique pressures around digital engagement. Students and young professionals often face expectations for constant availability and rapid response to demonstrate commitment and competitiveness (Montag & Walla, 2016).

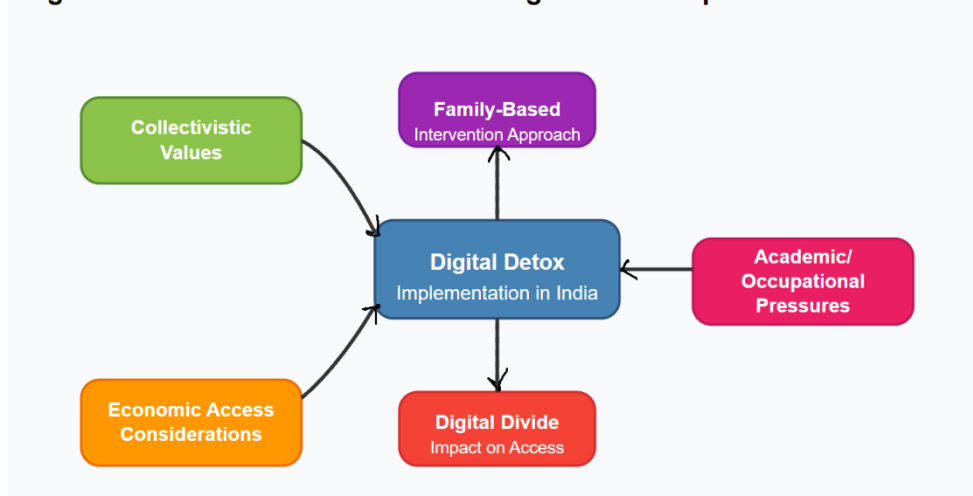
Culturally informed approaches recognize:

- Academic success may genuinely require extensive digital engagement.
- Professional advancement often hinges on digital availability.
- Competitive pressures create legitimate concerns about disconnection.

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Interventions should therefore address systemic pressures rather than focusing solely on individual choices. Figure 4 highlights three key cultural factors that influence digital detox implementation in the Indian context: collectivistic values, economic access considerations, and academic/occupational pressures.

Figure 4. Cultural Considerations for Digital Detox Implementation in India



Implications for Counselling Psychology Practice

The reconceptualization of digital detox presented in this paper offers several implications for counselling psychology practice in India:

Assessment and Formulation

Rather than treating digital overuse as a discrete problem, counselling psychologists should conceptualize it within broader patterns of self-regulation, psychological needs, and environmental influences. Assessment should examine:

- Digital behaviour's as functional responses to underlying needs.
- Cultural and contextual factors shaping usage patterns.
- Individual values and their alignment with digital habits.
- Existing self-regulation capacities and challenges.

This comprehensive formulation prevents simplistic approaches focused solely on usage reduction.

Intervention Design

Effective interventions should integrate multiple components based on the DIGITAL-BALANCE framework:

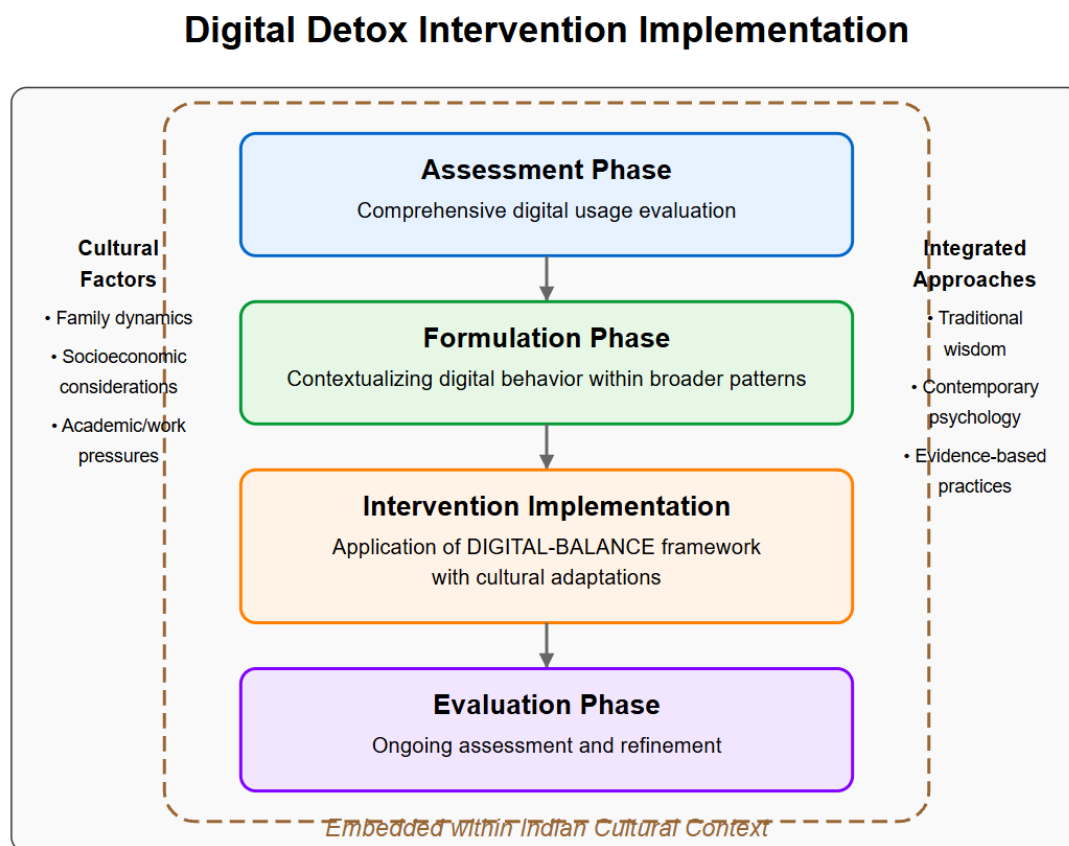
- Mindfulness practices enhancing awareness of automatic digital engagement.
- Values clarification connecting digital choices to meaningful life directions.
- Environmental modifications reducing trigger exposure.
- Behavioural experiments testing assumptions about digital necessity.
- Graduated exposure to discomfort associated with reduced usage.
- Cultural adaptations addressing family expectations and social norms.

These integrated approaches address multiple levels of influence rather than focusing on willpower alone. Figure 5 illustrates the process of implementing digital detox interventions

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within counselling psychology practice, emphasizing the importance of cultural context throughout the intervention process.

Figure 5. Digital Detox Intervention Implementation Flowchart



Counsellor Training and Development

Counselling psychology training programs should incorporate digital wellbeing components including:

- Self-reflection on counsellors own digital habits and patterns.
- Exploration of countertransference related to technology use.
- Training in culturally sensitive digital wellbeing assessment.
- Familiarity with evidence-based approaches to problematic digital use.
- Integration of traditional contemplative practices with contemporary interventions.

This preparation ensures counsellors can effectively address increasingly common digital concerns (Kuss & Griffiths, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Digital detox, reconceptualised through the lens of established psychological principles and ancient contemplative traditions, offers a valuable approach for addressing emerging mental health challenges in contemporary India. By situating this practice within broader frameworks of self-regulation, attention management, and mindful engagement, counselling psychologists can move beyond simplistic abstinence models toward nuanced interventions addressing underlying psychological processes.

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The DIGITAL-BALANCE framework provides a structured approach for conceptualizing interventions that recognize both universal psychological principles and unique cultural contexts. By drawing connections between ancient wisdom traditions and contemporary psychological science, this framework offers particular relevance for Indian counselling psychology practice.

As India navigates its digital transformation, counselling psychologists have an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to public discourse on technological wellbeing. Rather than positioning digital detox as a novel solution or reactionary rejection of technology, they can offer balanced perspectives grounded in both traditional wisdom and contemporary science helping individuals develop mindful, intentional relationships with technology that enhance rather than diminish psychological wellbeing (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Anusha, A., Ishwarya, V., Mahalakshmi, S. & Mufina, B.J. (2026). Digital Detox for Mental Health: Reconceptualising an Ancient Practice for Modern India. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(1), 3149-3158. DIP:18.01.313.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.313