

## LESSON PLAN

### Dealing With Digital Stress

This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.



**LEVEL:** Grades 9-12

**DURATION:** 1.5 - 2.5 hours

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#### Overview

In this lesson, students reflect on the ways in which digital media can cause stress. Through a series of role-playing exercises, they consider how social media can cause stress by making us compare the highlights of others' lives to the lowlights of our own, and practice strategies for coping with digital stress.

#### Learning Outcomes

##### BIG IDEAS

Students will:

Understand:

- That interactions through digital media have real impact
- Reflect on their digital habits and coping skills
- That audiences negotiate meaning
- Consider the different roles that digital media play in their lives

##### LEARNING GOALS

Know:

- Skills for managing stress and maintaining life balance
- How to manage the role of digital media in general, and social media in particular, in their lives

Do:

- Develop coping skills through performing short scenes
- Create a media product (optional)
- Use social media for learning (optional)



## Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the following handouts:

- *Digital Stress Self-Test*
- *Dealing With Digital Stress*
- *Cheerleader Game Scenarios* (there are eleven scenarios; make 3 copies of each)

Optional: Provide or have students bring cameras (still or video; cell phone cameras can be used) and provide access to video-editing software or a photo-hosting site or set up a real or mock social network profile for the “Better or Worse” activity.

## Procedure

### **DIGITAL STRESS**

Begin by distributing the handout *Digital Stress Self-Test* and read through it with the class. After reassuring them that nobody (including you) will see the results, have students complete the handout.

Once students have completed the self-test, have them turn the page over and *reflect for five minutes* on the question of what causes digital stress. Then have them do five minutes of “Wild Mind” writing on that question. (Make sure that nobody starts writing before the five minutes’ reflection time is up, and that during the five minutes of “Wild Mind” writing they do not stop or take their pens or pencils off the paper). Reassure them that if they can’t think of anything to write, they can repeat the question or simply write “I can’t think of anything to write.”

After the five-minute writing session, have students read what they wrote and then share with the class what they think causes digital stress. (They should not read their “Wild Mind” writing verbatim, but “mine” it for insights to share.) Make sure the following things come up:

- Social media can make you worry about getting left out or about what people are saying about you if you aren’t constantly checking it.
- Social media can make you feel like other people are having more fun or have better lives than you because you only see the highlights of their lives.

- You can feel pressure to always seem positive in your social media.
- Social media can make it hard to get work done or enjoy things because you're always checking it or posting to it.
- Digital stress affects both boys and girls. (In fact, some research has found that boys are more affected by digital stress than girls!)

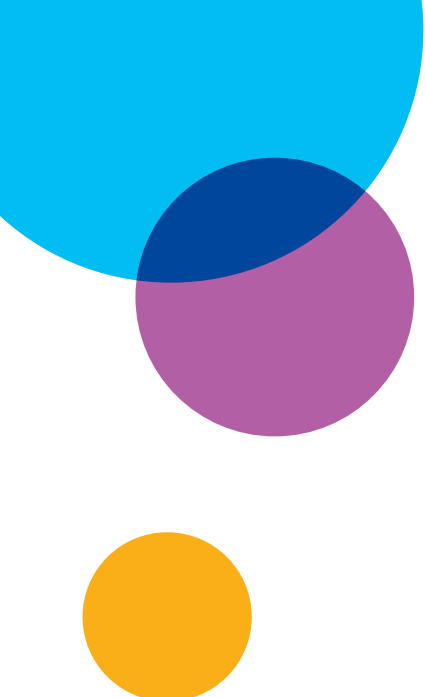
### **BETTER OR WORSE**

Now tell students you are going to explore the causes of digital stress through a drama game called "Better or Worse." Have the class pick a social event that they might participate in, such as a date, a party, a sports event, a trip to the beach, etc. Recruit enough students to act out key roles in the event. Then have other students write down positive and negative things that might happen to different people at the event (positive examples might include: you sink a basket at a basketball game, or meet someone you like at a party; negative examples might include: you slip and fall down at a basketball game, or spill a drink on someone you like at a party.) Have the students pass their written suggestions to you (so that you can weed out any that are inappropriate), select an equal number of positive and negative examples, and give them to the students acting in the scene to read without sharing them with the rest of the class.

Now divide the rest of the class into the Positive team and the Negative team. Each team is going to selectively document the scene, with the Positive team only recording positive events and the Negative team only recording negative events. Depending on your technical capabilities and time constraints, the teams may either document these with cameras or simply by writing them down. Once the scene has been completed, the two teams will assemble their "version" of the event: again depending on your technical capabilities and time constraints, this can be done simply by reading the list, by editing together the video they recorded, or by posting photos to a photo-hosting site or a real or mock social networking profile.

### **DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS**

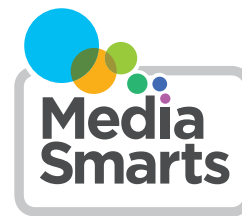
Ask students how they would feel if they saw the "positive" version on someone's social network and how they would feel if they saw the "negative" version. If both the positive and negative events happened to them, would they feel pressure to post more of one type or another?



Distribute the handout *Dealing With Digital Stress* and go through it with the class. Wherever possible, draw connections back to the scene and the *Digital Stress Self-Test*.

### **CHEERLEADER GAME**

Divide the class into groups of three or four. Distribute the handout *Cheerleader Game Scenarios* and assign one scenario handout to each of the groups. In each group, one or two students should play the characters in the scenario while the other two should act as “cheerleaders” who periodically “freeze” the action to suggest how the characters could use strategies from the *Dealing With Digital Stress* handout to manage their digital stress. Depending on your technical capabilities and time constraints, these scenes can be done as live skits, as videos, or in real or mock social networks.



# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

## Digital Stress Self-Test

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*Digital stress* means stress that we have from using digital devices (such as phones, computers, game consoles, etc.) and digital media (such as social networks, games, messenger apps, etc.)

Professor Firdaus Dhabhar at the Stanford Center on Stress and Health defines stress as “a constellation of events that begins with a stimulus or challenge—a stressor—that is detected by the brain which activates the fight-or-flight systems in the body—the biological stress response.” *Short-term stress* can be a useful thing: it can give us better physical or mental performance when we’re in danger or a lot is at stake. But *long-term stress*, when we stay stressed for long periods without time to rest or relax, can have a lot of negative effects like increasing the risk of depression.

Take the quiz below to see how much digital stress you’re under. Check the box next to each statement that you feel is true of you, then count up your score out of 25. Don’t worry – you won’t have to share your score or your specific responses with anybody.

- I could not guess how many times I check my social media (Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.) in a day.
- I find it stressful to go a long time (like a class period) without checking my social media.
- I could not guess how much time I spend playing online games in a week.
- I worry about what other people will think or say about me if I go a long time without posting on my social media or without playing online games.
- I have missed out on in-person experiences with my friends and family because I was checking social media or playing games.
- I have been late for appointments with my friends or family because I was checking social media or playing games.
- I have been late for school assignments because I was checking social media or playing games.
- I have thought that I heard or felt a notification (new post, reply, text, etc.) from my phone that wasn’t really there.
- I have told myself I’ll go to sleep after a post gets one more reaction.
- I have told myself I’ll go to sleep after I get one more thing (a new level, an item, a badge, etc.) in an online game.
- I have gotten up in the night to check my phone.
- I often play games or check my social media when my parents think I am asleep.
- I spend less time with my friends or family than I would like to because of using screen devices.
- I have had fights with my friends or family about my use of screen devices.
- I often compare my life to other people’s based on what I see on social media.
- I have taken down a post because it didn’t get enough likes or other responses.
- I have missed out on enjoying things because I was busy documenting them (taking pictures, posting about them, etc.).
- I often worry that my friends are having fun without me.
- I worry about missing out on my friends’ inside jokes if I don’t check my social media.
- I sometimes think my friends post things just to make me feel jealous or left out.

## DIGITAL STRESS SELF-TEST

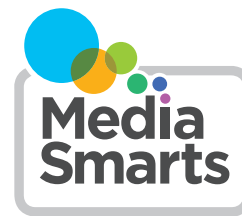
- I feel like I should only post things that are positive and make me look like I'm happy.
- I make sure to post to my social networks whenever something good happens to me.
- I have asked my friends to take down photos of me because I don't think I look good in them.
- I have posted provocative, offensive or revealing posts or photos because I knew they would get more reactions.
- There is a big difference between the person I am online and offline.

### REFLECTION

Now that you've finished your self-test and added up your score, you're going to take *five minutes* to reflect quietly on what you think causes digital stress. Then you're going to do five minutes of "wild mind" writing starting with the phrase "Digital stress is".

### WHAT IS WILD MIND WRITING?

- Wild mind writing is a way of getting past your inner editor to what you really think and feel. The rules of wild mind writing are:
- You will write for the whole five minutes.
- Keep your hand moving. If you can't think of anything to write, rewrite the starting phrase ("digital stress is") until you start writing something else.
- Don't stop to reread the line you have just written.
- Don't delete or cross out anything you've written.



# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

## Dealing With Digital Stress

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There are three main ways of dealing with digital stress. The first is through *time management*: if your time is better organized, your online life won't get in the way of other things you need to do. The second is through *changing your habits and attitudes* to make your digital life less stressful. Finally, it's important to *make time for rest and reflection* so that you aren't constantly under stress.

### TIME MANAGEMENT

- You can't do everything. Think about the things that are most important to you (School? Work? Family? Hobbies?) and make sure to put those *first*.
- Make a to-do list of things you *need* to do and use a planner to keep track of them. Prioritize the list by putting the most important things first.
- Put your digital devices to work for *you* by using calendar apps to remind you *before* things are supposed to be done.
- Decide on times (like during family meals) and places (like your bedroom) where you won't use screen devices at all.

### CHANGING HABITS AND ATTITUDES

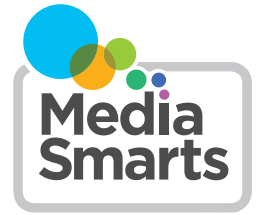
- Try to become more mindful of how you use screen devices and the impact that different activities have on you. One trick is to say out loud why you're turning on a device or using an app every time you do it.
- Don't compare yourself to people you see online – including your friends. Remember that people usually just post their good news and their best pics online – and a lot of people edit their photos and use filters to make them look as good as possible.
- Be where you are, when you are. When you're doing something fun, enjoy it. Don't worry about getting pictures of it or worrying about what other people will think of it.
- Accept that you can't be there for everything – even virtually. Trying to keep tabs on everything

will just stress you out.

- Don't take it personally. Odds are, your friends aren't posting things to make you jealous: they're trying to make themselves and their lives look good, just like you.
- Be honest. You may feel like people expect you to only share positive things, but research has shown that people are actually happier – and get more emotional support from others – when they are honest about how they present themselves online.

### MAKING TIME FOR REST AND REFLECTION

- Turn off notifications for any app where you don't absolutely need them. You can't relax when your phone is always pinging or buzzing, or even when you're expecting it to.
- Play a game of "phone stack" with your friends: when you're hanging out together, everyone puts their phones (or any other digital device) in a pile. Whoever can last longest without picking theirs up wins!
- Try to stick to just one screen at a time. Having music on in the background is okay, but multitasking, or switching between activities, disrupts your concentration and makes it harder to enjoy what you're doing.
- Give yourself permission to take a break. It doesn't have to be a week or even a whole day – just one hour a day where you're totally offline does you as much good, and is easier to keep up over time. People say that friends and family are what make them feel pressured to stay connected, so make sure everyone knows not to expect you to respond to anything during that time.



# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

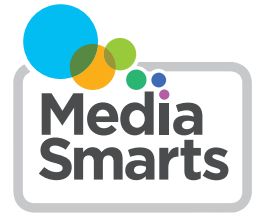
## The Cheerleader Game – Scenario One

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This exercise is a version of the improv game “Freeze”. One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be “cheerleaders” who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we’ve learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You take a photo of yourself that you really like and post it to your Instagram account. After an hour you check to see how your friends have responded and it’s only gotten three likes. It’s your favourite picture of yourself ever, but you feel embarrassed that it’s gotten so few likes and think about taking it down.





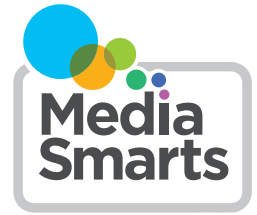
# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

## The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Two

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This exercise is a version of the improv game “Freeze”. One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be “cheerleaders” who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we’ve learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

Right before exam time you get asked to become the new team leader in your favourite online game. You need to study but you also feel like you’d be letting down your team members if you cut back on your playing time.



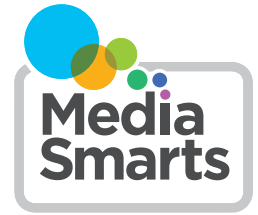
# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

## The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Three

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This exercise is a version of the improv game “Freeze”. One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be “cheerleaders” who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we’ve learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

Two of you are going to a big new movie on opening night. One of you gets annoyed with the other because s/he keeps texting other friends who are seeing the movie and going online to see what other people are posting about it.



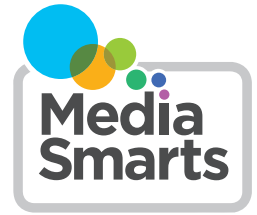
# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

## The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Four

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This exercise is a version of the improv game “Freeze”. One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be “cheerleaders” who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we’ve learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

Your parents take you on a surprise camping trip. You forget to post about it on your social media before you leave and after two days you start to worry about what your friends are saying about you, because you’ve never gone two days without posting something before.



# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

## The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Five

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This exercise is a version of the improv game “Freeze”. One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be “cheerleaders” who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we’ve learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

Your friend tags you in a photo that was taken at a party. Your friend looks great, but you’re in the photo too and you look terrible! Your friend loves the photo but you really want them to take it down.



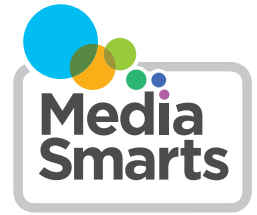
# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

## The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Seven

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This exercise is a version of the improv game “Freeze”. One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be “cheerleaders” who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we’ve learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You just got the new expansion for your favourite game and the first mission is really long. You don’t want to quit for the night without finishing it, though, so you stay up late and wind up oversleeping and being late for school the next morning.



# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

## The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Seven

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This exercise is a version of the improv game “Freeze”. One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be “cheerleaders” who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we’ve learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

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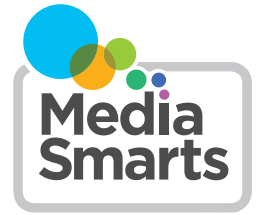
# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

## The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Eight

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This exercise is a version of the improv game “Freeze”. One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be “cheerleaders” who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we’ve learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You and a friend are supposed to work on a project together for school. The problem is that another friend of yours is having a crisis and keeps texting you for advice, so you can’t concentrate on doing your part of the project.



# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

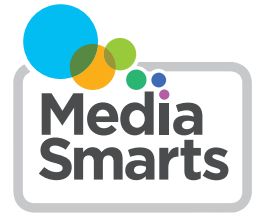
## The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Nine

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This exercise is a version of the improv game “Freeze”. One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be “cheerleaders” who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we’ve learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You’re feeling sad because you got a bad mark on a test, so you post a message asking your friends to cheer you up. When only a few of them reply, though, you feel worse than you did before.





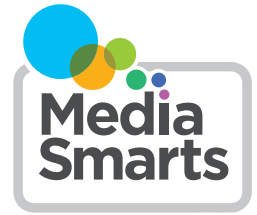
# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

## The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Ten

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This exercise is a version of the improv game “Freeze”. One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be “cheerleaders” who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we’ve learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You get really good news the morning before a test and post about it before class. During the test you keep feeling your phone buzzing as people respond to your post. Finally you can’t resist it and check your notifications, but your teacher sees you and thinks you’re cheating!



# DEALING WITH DIGITAL STRESS

## The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Eleven

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This exercise is a version of the improv game “Freeze”. One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be “cheerleaders” who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we’ve learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You and your best friend both go on trips for the summer. Your trip is fun, but when you check your friend’s feed it seems like s/he’s always having an amazing time, and you can’t help feeling jealous.