

Digital Deceptions

DIGITAL
DECEPTIONS

TIME TO MAKE
BETTER CHOICES

Amir Abdelzaher, PhD

Ahmed Howeedy, MD

Arfan Qureshi, MA

Contents

Preface	6
Introduction	8

Perceived Benefits, Real Harms

Chapter 1	The Common Narrative: Breaking Misconceptions	13
Chapter 2	Digital Addiction: Impact on the Brain	39
Chapter 3	Privacy, Surveillance, Manipulation	53
Chapter 4	Welcome to the Age of AI	73

Time to Make Better Choices

Chapter 5	Principles of Personal Change	91
Chapter 6	Parenting in the Digital Age	119
Chapter 7	Healthy Living in the Digital Age	131
Chapter 8	The Greatest Means	137

The Road Ahead

Chapter 9	Final Thoughts	145
-----------	----------------------	-----

“It is time to stop and see where our digital choices have led us.”

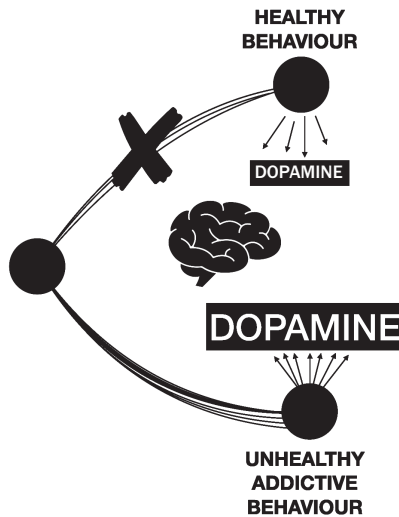
The truth is that there is another alternative, there is another way. We need not be enslaved by these devices. We can, in fact, be successful and engage in the modern world while better maintaining our humanity. This book offers seekers of the Divine in the modern age a roadmap for doing so. But it begins with breaking misconceptions, understanding the real nature of these digital devices and platforms, and learning the skills necessary to navigate the digital age.

In the first half of the book, over four chapters, we examine the perceived benefits of devices and platforms alongside the actual harms that they cause, including a chapter on the dangerous culmination of these technologies with the development of Artificial Intelligence. In the second half of the book, over four chapters, we present a practical discussion with specific recommendations and suggestions for us all on how to better engage with digital communication means and thrive in the digital age.

We pray that Allah accepts this humble work and makes it purely for His sake. And all success is only from Allah.

PERCEIVED
BENEFITS,
**REAL
HARMS**

Have you ever wondered why a teenager who spends hours a day playing video games finds no enjoyment whatsoever in playing outside or going fishing? Those natural healthy activities have become “boring” because physiologically their brain has changed. Devices and apps have been designed to be unpredictable, exciting, providing rapid response positive feedback to the user that gives them an immediate sense of accomplishment. Imagine hearing, “Congratulations! You have reached level 14” accompanied by a musical jingle and animation. You cannot get that level of instant gratification and validation from reading or going for a walk.



Faced with that, the brain can no longer access the dopamine produced from those natural healthy activities, as it has been pulled towards an addictive behaviour that produces all the dopamine needed. Even if there is some dopamine produced from reading or spending time in nature, it is short lived as it doesn't compare to the huge amounts of dopamine produced with video games or social media. Imagine a child who has grown up eating sugary sweets and candies regularly; the delicious taste of a crisp, juicy apple is completely lost on them.

This is the hijacking of the dopamine pathway. It is a physiological change that occurs in the brain of a person, regardless of their age, when they engage in addictive behaviours regularly: a young child addicted to YouTube videos, a teenager addicted to TikTok, a young professional addicted to their emails and chatting, a mother addicted to Candy Crush. These addictive behaviours pull people away from enjoying natural, healthy activities. Most importantly, they pull the soul away from finding bliss and pleasure in the remembrance and worship of Allah.

It has reached the point that Internet Addiction Disorder¹⁹ is now a recognised condition and people have actually needed to seek clinical treatment for their digital addictions.^{20,21}

The good news is that these changes can be reversed and undone even after many years. By removing addictive behaviours and replacing them with healthy ones, the pathways and dopamine release can be reset in the brain. Once the child is weaned off those sugary sweets, their taste buds will begin to appreciate again the balanced bite of a Honeycrisp apple.

Digital Imagery and the Brain

Aside from the addictive pathways induced mentioned above, there is another significant effect on the brain by simply viewing digital imagery.

When we look at a real object, our brain and senses are fully stimulated and engaged. The real object exists in a space and a context, with surrounding objects, sights, sounds, and smells. Light from the

19 "Internet Addiction Disorder - Signs, Symptoms, and Treatments," May 22, 2019, <https://www.psycom.net/iadcriteria.html>

20 "Inside the Rehab Saving Young Men from Their Internet Addiction ...," June 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jun/16/internet-addiction-gaming-restart-therapy-washington>

21 "Should DSM-V Designate 'Internet Addiction' a Mental Disorder," February 2009, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2719452/>

TIME
TO MAKE
**BETTER
CHOICES**

Personal Principles of Change

***“I agree with you, but what can I do,
there is no other way in this day and age...”***

***The challenge of living in these times while
avoiding the harms mentioned so far may seem
daunting and perhaps even impossible. In this
chapter, we will explore practical and achievable
steps for any sincere seeker of change to move
in the right direction.***

Choose the Way of Taqwa

An essential tool in developing a healthier relationship with the digital world is simply to learn to “choose the way of *taqwa* (Allah-consciousness)” through employing the principles and the tools outlined in this chapter as well as having an overall active awareness and prioritisation in life of what really matters. In the digital age, we have to take the path of *taqwa* with our digital devices.

- 1 This means first eliminating the impermissible for ourselves and our family. This includes impermissible images, impermissible music, and impermissible speech such as gossip and backbiting.
- 2 Next we can work towards eliminating disliked use, such as wasting time.
- 3 Then we can elevate to the way of *ihsān* (spiritual excellence), and limit our engagement with digital devices and platforms to only what is purposeful, in a manner that pleases Allah and His Messenger ﷺ. We need to learn to always prefer spiritual over worldly gain and thus eternal over temporary gain.
- 4 The final steps in this path are to practise a healthy level of *zuhd* (abstinence) in removing the unnecessary or wasteful from our lives and replacing it with what is more beneficial to us. This requires us to monitor the signals of our heart to detect what moves it in the right direction and what moves it in the wrong direction. Our heart is our most precious asset, our essence, and what we will return to Allah with on the Day of Judgement: “The Day on which neither wealth will be of any use, nor children, except the one who comes to Allah with a sound heart” (Qur’an 26:88-89). We need to choose those things that will increase the soundness of our heart.

Parenting in the Digital Age

Parenting has always been one of the most blessed yet difficult responsibilities humans take on. When we add the layer of digital considerations of raising children in the modern age, things get especially complex and confusing for a parent who is sincerely trying to do the best job they can.

*“relying upon Allah,
worshipping and obeying Him,
abstaining from what He has
prohibited, strengthening our
connection with Him ”*

The Greatest Means

The Strongest Means in the Age of Digital

Deception: Our Spiritual Armour

Although some of what we mention in this chapter has been discussed at some level throughout the book, we felt that this topic deserved its own chapter given its central importance. We have discussed many practical means in this second part of the book, on how to make better choices in our relationship with the digital world. However, in addition to all these means we cannot emphasise enough that the strongest means we have at our disposal are those that are purely Divine in origin.