



FROM SCREEN TIME TO PEACE OF MIND: DIGITAL ETHICS FOR MENTAL WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

In an era dominated by digital interactions, the relationship between technology and mental well-being has become a crucial ethical concern. Excessive screen time, algorithm-driven content, and addictive digital experiences often contribute to stress, anxiety, and diminished psychological resilience. Digital ethics plays a crucial role in shaping a healthier online environment. It involves not only safeguarding personal data and ensuring privacy but also promoting mindful and responsible digital consumption. Issues such as cyberbullying, misinformation, excessive screen time, and online toxicity highlight the urgent need for a more ethical approach to digital engagement. When left unchecked, these factors can erode mental health, leading to social isolation, reduced self-esteem, and emotional distress. This article explores the intersection of digital ethics and mental well-being, shedding light on how individuals, technology companies, and policymakers can work together to foster a healthier, more ethical digital culture. By emphasizing digital ethics, raising awareness, and enforcing responsible policies, we can shift from a screen-centric world to one that values mental well-being and tranquillity in the digital era.

KEYWORDS: Digital Addiction, Digital Ethics, Mental Well-Being, Screen Time Management, Technology.

I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is characterized by rapid technological advancements, leading to a highly interconnected digital world. Digital technology has become an inseparable part of daily life, influencing how we work, communicate, and entertain ourselves. From smartphones and social media to artificial intelligence and virtual reality, digital technology has profoundly influenced nearly every aspect of human life. While these advancements have undoubtedly improved communication, education, business, and entertainment, they have also introduced challenges, particularly regarding mental well-being. Issues such as digital addiction, cyberbullying, information overload, and social comparison have emerged, raising concerns about the long-term effects of excessive technology use on mental health. The excessive use of digital platforms, from social media to streaming services, has been linked to stress, anxiety, digital fatigue, and even addiction, making it imperative to establish ethical guidelines for responsible technology use.¹

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), "Mental Health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community" Further WHO states that the mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders.²

¹ Tejaswini Kantha, et.al, "Ethics in the Digital Era: Technology's Role in Shaping Society" 11 Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science And Humanities (2024)

² <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/154543#definition> Visited 13 March 2025.

³ Section 2(s), The Mental Healthcare Act, 2017.

⁴ Harish Krishnan and Charu Kapoor, "The importance of inculcating digital ethics in students" The Hindu February 3, 2024.

According to The Mental Healthcare Act, "Mental illness means a substantial disorder of thinking, mood, perception, orientation or memory that grossly impairs judgment, behaviour, capacity to recognise reality or ability to meet the ordinary demands of life, mental conditions associated with the abuse of alcohol and drugs, but does not include mental retardation which is a condition of arrested or incomplete development of mind of a person, specially characterised by subnormality of intelligence."³

The digital era has revolutionized the way humans interact, work, and socialize. However, its influence on mental health is a growing concern among psychologists, researchers, and healthcare professionals. Some of the key impacts of digital technology on mental well-being include:

- **Digital Addiction and Dependence**

The pervasive use of smartphones, social media, and digital entertainment has led to addictive behaviors, often referred to as "digital addiction." Studies indicate that excessive screen time can lead to symptoms similar to substance abuse, including withdrawal, cravings, and compulsive behavior.⁴ Social media platforms, designed with engagement-driven algorithms, encourage users to spend prolonged hours scrolling through content, often leading to reduced productivity and disrupted sleep patterns.⁵

<https://www.thehindu.com/education/the-importance-of-inculcating-digital-ethics-in-students/article67760610.ece> (Last visited 7 February 2025)

⁵ Müller, Vincent C. (ed.), "The history of digital ethics", Oxford handbook of digital ethics (2022)

<https://philpapers.org/archive/MLLHOD.pdf> (Last visited 10 February 25)



- **Social Media and Self-Esteem Issues**

While social media allows for greater connectivity, it also fosters unhealthy comparisons and unrealistic expectations. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok often present curated versions of people's lives, leading to the "highlight reel effect." Users, particularly young individuals, may develop anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem due to feelings of inadequacy. Research suggests that excessive exposure to edited images and idealized lifestyles contributes to body image issues and self-doubt.

- **Cyberbullying and Online Harassment**

One of the darker sides of the digital era is the rise of cyberbullying and online harassment. Unlike traditional bullying, online harassment can be relentless, anonymous, and widespread. Victims of cyberbullying often experience emotional distress, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts. The absence of face-to-face interaction emboldens perpetrators, making online spaces hostile and unsafe for vulnerable individuals. The evolution of the concept of deepfake has arisen at a breakneck pace, which means "an image or a video of a person in which their face or body has been digitally altered so that they appear to be someone else, typically used maliciously or to spread false information."

- **Information Overload and Digital Burnout**

The massive amount of information out there on the internet, along with constant notifications, emails, and updates, can overwhelm us. Our brains have a hard time processing all that excess data, which leads to cognitive fatigue, stress, and being unable to make decisions. A lot of professionals deal with digital burnout, where being constantly plugged in leaves them exhausted and negatively affects their mental performance.⁶

- **The Loss of In-Person Communication Skills**

Even though digital communication is super convenient, it often takes the place of in-person interactions, which can cut down on real human connections. Depending too much on online chats can weaken our social skills, empathy, and emotional intelligence. Because of this, many people find it hard to have face-to-face conversations, leading to more social anxiety and feelings of isolation.

Digital ethics plays a crucial role in shaping a healthier online environment. It involves not only safeguarding personal data and ensuring privacy but also promoting mindful and responsible digital consumption. Issues such as cyberbullying, misinformation, excessive screen time, and online toxicity highlight the urgent need for a more ethical approach to digital engagement. When left unchecked, these factors can erode mental health, leading to social isolation, reduced self-esteem, and emotional distress.

This article explores the impact of the digital era on mental well-being, the role of digital ethics in shaping a healthier online environment, and the importance of maintaining a balance between technology and mental health. Additionally, it outlines the purpose and scope of the discussion, emphasizing

⁶ Christopher Burr, et.al. "The Ethics of Digital Well-Being: A Thematic Review" 26(4) *Sci Eng Ethics* January (2020).

⁷ Teran Luis, et.al.; "A Literature Review on Digital Ethics from a Humanistic and Sustainable Perspective" ICEGOV 21: Proceedings

the need for responsible digital engagement and strategies for mitigating negative psychological effects.

II. MEANING OF DIGITAL ETHICS

Digital ethics is all about the moral guidelines we're supposed to follow when using technology, making sure that digital tools and platforms support people's well-being instead of taking advantage of their weaknesses. In terms of mental health, digital ethics is super important for creating a safer and more balanced online space. It covers a bunch of ethical issues like data privacy, how people behave online, and the rising problem of digital addiction.⁷ As technology becomes more embedded in everyday life, worries about data privacy have ramped up. A lot of digital platforms collect and profit from user data, often without clear consent, which makes users feel anxious and distrustful. Good digital practices require being open about how data is collected, having clear consent processes for users, and putting strong security measures in place to protect personal information.

Another significant ethical concern is online behavior, which includes issues such as cyberbullying, hate speech, and misinformation. Anonymity and the lack of accountability in digital spaces often embolden individuals to engage in harmful behavior, negatively impacting the mental well-being of others. Social media platforms and online forums must implement stricter content moderation policies and promote digital literacy to foster respectful interactions. Additionally, digital addiction has emerged as a growing ethical challenge, with many tech companies designing platforms that encourage excessive use through engagement-driven algorithms. The compulsive nature of social media, gaming, and streaming services can lead to anxiety, depression, and reduced cognitive function. Ethical technology design should prioritize user well-being by incorporating features such as screen time reminders, healthy usage prompts, and content moderation to prevent overconsumption.

The relationship between ethical technology use and mental health is deeply interconnected. When digital platforms operate ethically—respecting user privacy, minimizing addictive features, and promoting positive interactions—they contribute to improved psychological well-being. Conversely, unethical digital practices can lead to stress, anxiety, and social isolation. Promoting ethical tech use requires a collective effort from individuals, policymakers, and technology companies to create an online ecosystem that prioritizes mental health. By embracing digital ethics, society can harness the benefits of technology while mitigating its risks, ultimately fostering a healthier and more sustainable digital future.

III. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF EXCESSIVE SCREEN TIME

The digital revolution has brought unprecedented convenience and connectivity, but it has also introduced significant

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psychological challenges. The widespread use of digital devices has led to increased screen time, which can negatively impact cognitive functions, emotional well-being, and overall mental health. As society becomes increasingly dependent on technology, understanding the psychological consequences of excessive screen time is critical for fostering a healthier digital culture.

- **Effects on Cognitive Functions:** Excessive screen time has been linked to impaired cognitive functions, including reduced attention span and memory. The constant influx of information from multiple sources—such as social media, news updates, and emails—overloads the brain, making it difficult to focus and process information effectively. This phenomenon, known as "continuous partial attention," can lead to difficulties in concentrating on tasks, diminished problem-solving abilities, and decreased productivity. Furthermore, the passive consumption of digital content, such as scrolling through social media feeds or binge-watching videos, often requires minimal cognitive effort. This lack of mental stimulation can hinder the development of critical thinking skills and long-term memory formation. The overstimulation caused by rapid shifts between digital tasks also disrupts deep, focused thinking, reducing the capacity for creative and analytical thought.
- **Emotional Consequences:** Excessive screen time has been associated with a range of emotional consequences, including increased stress, anxiety, and depression. The perpetual connectivity enabled by smartphones and other digital devices creates a sense of obligation to respond to messages, notifications, and emails promptly, contributing to heightened stress levels. Additionally, the "always-on" culture fosters anxiety, as individuals may feel overwhelmed by the constant need to stay updated and engaged online. Depression is another significant emotional consequence of excessive screen time, particularly linked to social media use. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok often present idealized versions of people's lives, leading to unhealthy comparisons and feelings of inadequacy. The tendency to measure self-worth against curated online personas can exacerbate low self-esteem and depressive symptoms, especially among adolescents and young adults. The anonymity of the internet also facilitates cyberbullying and online harassment, causing emotional distress and, in severe cases, leading to suicidal ideation.⁸
- **The Role of Social Media in Mental Health Challenges:** Social media plays a pivotal role in shaping mental health outcomes. While platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter offer avenues for social interaction and self-expression, they also expose users to cyberbullying, harassment, and the pressures of maintaining a curated online presence. The constant need for validation through likes, comments, and shares can create a dependency that affects self-worth. Moreover, the phenomenon of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) is exacerbated by social media,

where users constantly compare their experiences to the highlight reels of others. This can lead to anxiety and dissatisfaction with one's own life. Algorithms designed to maximize engagement often prioritize sensational or emotionally charged content, leading to increased exposure to divisive topics and fake news, which further contributes to stress and emotional exhaustion.⁹

Furthermore, social media echo chambers can reinforce negative thinking patterns and perpetuate harmful narratives, making it difficult for individuals to break free from cycles of negativity. These platforms also tend to reduce meaningful interactions, replacing them with superficial engagements, which can diminish feelings of genuine connection and increase social isolation.

- **The Rise of Digital Fatigue and Burnout:** Digital fatigue, characterized by exhaustion stemming from prolonged screen exposure, has become a common issue in modern life. The shift to remote work and virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic intensified screen usage, leading to a phenomenon known as "Zoom fatigue." This specific type of digital fatigue results from extended video calls, which demand continuous eye contact and heightened self-awareness, contributing to mental exhaustion. Beyond professional and educational settings, constant connectivity blurs the boundaries between work and personal life, leaving little time for recovery. The inability to disconnect from digital devices leads to burnout, a state of chronic stress that manifests as physical and emotional exhaustion, reduced productivity, and a sense of detachment. Unlike traditional burnout, digital burnout is not limited to workplace settings; it extends into personal life, affecting relationships and leisure activities.

Digital fatigue also diminishes the brain's capacity for creativity and critical thinking. When the brain is overexposed to screens, it enters a passive consumption mode, inhibiting active engagement and problem-solving skills. This state of mental exhaustion reduces motivation, making even simple tasks seem insurmountable. Moreover, the constant barrage of notifications and information contributes to decision fatigue, where the ability to make thoughtful choices declines due to overexertion of cognitive resources. The physical symptoms of digital burnout—headaches, eye strain, and disrupted sleep—further exacerbate psychological distress. The cumulative effect of these factors creates a cycle of fatigue and decreased mental health, highlighting the urgent need for balanced technology use.

The psychological impact of excessive screen time is multifaceted, affecting cognitive functions, emotional well-being, and overall mental health. As digital devices continue to infiltrate every aspect of life, it is essential to recognize and address the negative consequences of prolonged screen exposure. Understanding these effects allows individuals, educators, and policymakers to develop strategies that promote healthier technology habits and foster environments conducive

⁸ Ahluwalia, Yashita & Balhara, Yatan, "Ensuring Mental Well-being in the Digital World: Challenges and Approaches" 4 *Indian Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 79-91 (2024)

⁹ Gupta M, Sharma A., "Fear of missing out: A brief overview of origin, theoretical underpinnings and relationship with mental health" 9(19) *World J Clin Cases* 4881-4889 (2021).



to mental well-being. By implementing measures such as digital detoxes, setting screen time limits, and promoting digital literacy, society can mitigate the adverse effects of screen time and promote a balanced, healthier digital life.

IV. ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

As technology continues to advance, ethical challenges in the digital world have become more pronounced, affecting individuals, societies, and mental well-being on a global scale. While the internet offers unparalleled access to information, communication, and innovation, it also presents significant risks such as misinformation, digital toxicity, cyberbullying, data privacy concerns, and the ethical responsibilities of tech companies in safeguarding mental health. Addressing these issues is crucial for creating a digital landscape that prioritizes ethical standards, protects users, and fosters a healthier relationship with technology.

- **Misinformation and Digital Toxicity:** One of the most pressing ethical concerns in the digital age is the spread of misinformation and the rise of digital toxicity. The rapid dissemination of false or misleading information—ranging from fake news and conspiracy theories to health-related disinformation—can have far-reaching consequences. Social media algorithms, designed to maximize engagement, often amplify sensational or polarizing content, reinforcing biases and creating echo chambers where misinformation thrives. This not only affects public discourse but also contributes to heightened anxiety, fear, and distrust among individuals. The spread of false narratives about health, politics, and social issues can lead to real-world harm, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, where misinformation about vaccines and treatments influenced public health decisions.

- Digital toxicity further exacerbates mental health issues by fostering an environment where negativity, hostility, and divisiveness prevail. Online platforms frequently become battlegrounds for ideological conflicts, personal attacks, and harassment, making digital spaces emotionally draining and psychologically damaging. The anonymity provided by the internet emboldens individuals to engage in aggressive and harmful behavior, often with little to no accountability. To counteract these issues, digital platforms must implement stricter content moderation policies, invest in AI-driven fact-checking systems, and promote digital literacy to help users critically evaluate the information they encounter online.

- **Cyberbullying and Online Harassment**
The anonymity and global reach of digital platforms have given rise to cyberbullying and online harassment, posing serious ethical concerns. Unlike traditional bullying, which is often confined to specific social settings, cyberbullying transcends physical boundaries, allowing perpetrators to target individuals relentlessly across various platforms. Victims of online harassment frequently experience stress, anxiety, depression, and, in severe cases, suicidal thoughts. Harassment can take many forms, including doxxing (the unauthorized release of personal information), cyberstalking, hate speech, and targeted abuse.

The psychological toll of cyberbullying is particularly concerning among teenagers and young adults, who are highly engaged in social media and online communities. The pressure to conform to social norms, fear of public shaming, and the inability to escape digital abuse contribute to declining mental health. Tech companies and policymakers have an ethical duty to address these issues by enforcing strict anti-harassment policies, offering better reporting mechanisms, and ensuring that online platforms are safe spaces for all users. Educational programs that promote digital etiquette and empathy can also play a crucial role in reducing online hostility and fostering a culture of respect.

- **Data Privacy and Surveillance Concerns**
In the digital world, personal data has become a valuable commodity, raising serious ethical concerns about privacy and surveillance. Many technology companies collect vast amounts of user data, often without explicit consent, to fuel targeted advertising and algorithm-driven content recommendations. While data collection helps enhance user experience and personalization, it also exposes individuals to risks such as identity theft, manipulation, and unauthorized surveillance. High-profile data breaches and scandals, such as the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica incident, have highlighted the dangers of unethical data practices, where personal information is exploited for political, commercial, or surveillance purposes.

Excessive surveillance, both by corporations and governments, poses additional ethical dilemmas. The erosion of privacy in the name of security or profit raises questions about the balance between public safety and individual freedoms. Many users are unaware of how much data they share online, making them vulnerable to exploitation. The psychological impact of constant surveillance can lead to paranoia, stress, and a sense of helplessness, as individuals feel they have no control over their digital footprint. To address these concerns, tech companies must prioritize data protection through transparent policies, user-friendly privacy settings, and stronger encryption methods. Governments should enforce stricter regulations on data collection and surveillance while ensuring that digital rights are upheld.

- **The Ethical Responsibility of Tech Companies in Mental Health**
As digital platforms continue to shape human interactions, tech companies bear a significant ethical responsibility in promoting mental well-being. Many platforms are designed to maximize engagement, often at the expense of user health. Features such as infinite scrolling, autoplay, and addictive notification systems keep users hooked, contributing to digital addiction, sleep deprivation, and mental fatigue. The ethical dilemma lies in whether tech companies should prioritize profit-driven engagement metrics or implement features that encourage responsible usage.

Some companies have taken steps toward ethical technology design by introducing screen time monitoring tools, digital well-being settings, and content moderation initiatives. However, these efforts are often voluntary and not universally adopted. There is a growing demand for corporate



accountability, where companies should actively design technology that prioritizes mental health. This includes implementing features that encourage breaks, promoting positive content, and reducing the visibility of harmful material. Additionally, social media platforms should collaborate with mental health organizations to provide support resources for users struggling with anxiety, depression, or cyberbullying.

Ethical considerations should also extend to artificial intelligence (AI) and recommendation algorithms. AI-driven content personalization can create addictive digital environments, reinforcing negative behaviors and emotional distress. Tech companies must ensure that AI is used ethically, with mechanisms in place to prevent harm, reduce misinformation, and promote well-being. Policymakers and regulatory bodies should also step in to establish guidelines that hold companies accountable for the psychological impact of their digital products.

V. BUILDING A HEALTHIER DIGITAL CULTURE

In a world where digital engagement is unavoidable, fostering a healthier digital culture has become essential for safeguarding mental well-being. The increasing reliance on technology for communication, work, and entertainment has blurred the boundaries between the online and offline worlds, often leading to digital fatigue, information overload, and emotional distress. To create a balanced and ethical digital environment, individuals and organizations must embrace responsible technology use, set clear boundaries, and promote mindful engagement.

A key aspect of this transformation is encouraging responsible digital consumption. Unchecked screen time and unfiltered online content can negatively impact mental health, leading to stress, anxiety, and reduced productivity. Adopting intentional digital habits, such as limiting social media use, prioritizing meaningful interactions, and critically evaluating online information, can help create a healthier relationship with technology.

Another crucial element is establishing ethical guidelines for social media engagement. Social platforms often foster comparison culture, cyberbullying, and toxic discussions, affecting self-esteem and emotional well-being. Ethical engagement involves promoting kindness, respecting diverse opinions, avoiding harmful content, and verifying information before sharing. Encouraging digital platforms to implement stronger policies against hate speech, harassment, and misinformation can contribute to a more supportive and constructive online space.

Additionally, the role of digital detox and mindful technology use cannot be overlooked. Constant exposure to screens can lead to mental exhaustion and reduced focus, making it necessary to take regular breaks from digital devices. Simple practices such as unplugging before bedtime, engaging in offline hobbies, and practicing mindfulness can significantly improve cognitive and emotional well-being. Mindful technology use means consciously choosing when, how, and

why we engage with digital platforms, ensuring that technology serves as a tool for enrichment rather than a source of distress.

Equally important is the need for boundaries in digital interactions. The always-online culture has created unrealistic expectations regarding availability, often leading to burnout and social pressure. Setting clear boundaries—such as limiting work-related communication outside office hours, avoiding unnecessary screen exposure, and prioritizing in-person interactions—can help maintain a healthy work-life balance and reduce digital stress.

By integrating these principles into daily life, individuals and organizations can work towards creating a more ethical, sustainable, and mentally supportive digital culture. A mindful approach to technology, coupled with responsible digital engagement, can transform the online space into one that fosters well-being, creativity, and meaningful connections.

VI. STRATEGIES FOR ETHICAL AND MINDFUL TECHNOLOGY USE

As technology continues to shape daily life, the need for ethical and mindful technology use has never been greater. While digital advancements offer unparalleled convenience and connectivity, their unregulated and excessive use can lead to mental exhaustion, anxiety, and emotional detachment. To counteract these negative effects, individuals, organizations, and technology developers must adopt strategies that prioritize digital well-being, responsible engagement, and ethical innovation.

One of the most effective ways to foster healthy technology habits is by setting screen time limits and using digital wellness tools. Excessive screen exposure can lead to reduced attention span, sleep disturbances, and digital fatigue. By implementing screen time restrictions, app usage trackers, and notification management tools, individuals can regain control over their digital consumption and create a balanced tech-life routine.

Another crucial aspect is practicing digital mindfulness, which involves developing awareness of online habits and their impact on mental well-being. Mindful technology use encourages individuals to engage with digital content intentionally, avoid unnecessary scrolling, and focus on meaningful interactions. Techniques such as scheduled digital detoxes, mindful browsing, and conscious social media engagement can help reduce the negative psychological effects of overconsumption.

Additionally, creating safe online spaces for open conversations is essential in promoting mental well-being and digital ethics. Digital platforms should foster inclusive, respectful, and supportive interactions, ensuring that users feel secure and valued. Encouraging community guidelines, anti-harassment policies, and digital literacy programs can help mitigate the spread of online toxicity, misinformation, and cyberbullying, leading to a more mentally nourishing digital environment.

Finally, the role of ethical AI in promoting digital well-being cannot be overlooked. AI-driven technologies have the potential to enhance user experiences, provide mental health



support, and filter harmful content. However, ethical considerations must be prioritized in AI development to ensure fairness, transparency, and user privacy. Responsible AI can be leveraged to curate positive content, identify harmful digital patterns, and encourage healthier online behaviors, ultimately contributing to a more ethical and mentally supportive digital ecosystem.

By integrating these strategies, individuals and organizations can cultivate a balanced, ethical, and mindful digital experience. Emphasizing intentional technology use, digital responsibility and AI ethics will pave the way for a future where digital advancements coexist harmoniously with mental well-being.

VII. CONCLUSION: TOWARD A DIGITALLY ETHICAL AND MENTALLY HEALTHY FUTURE

As technology continues to evolve, its impact on mental well-being cannot be ignored. The rise of excessive screen time, online toxicity, misinformation, and digital addiction highlights the urgent need for a more ethical and mindful approach to digital engagement. By prioritizing digital ethics, individuals, tech companies, and policymakers can create an online environment that supports mental health, fosters responsible behavior, and promotes well-being.

To achieve this, it is essential to adopt ethical digital practices, such as setting screen time boundaries, practicing digital mindfulness, fostering safe online spaces, and ensuring responsible AI development. Individuals must take accountability for their online behavior and consumption, while technology companies must implement stronger ethical safeguards to protect users from harm. Policymakers, educators, and mental health advocates must also work together to promote digital literacy and enforce regulations that prioritize user well-being.

Looking ahead, the future of technology must align with human-centered and ethical principles. Innovations in AI, social media, and digital platforms should be designed with a focus on mental health, inclusivity, and user empowerment. As society becomes increasingly reliant on digital interactions, advancing ethical tech solutions will be key to building a healthier, more balanced, and mentally sustainable digital world.

Now is the time to take action—to use technology wisely, engage responsibly, and advocate for a digital future that enhances well-being rather than harms it. By embracing ethical digital practices, we can transform the way we interact with technology, ensuring that it serves as a tool for connection, growth, and mental peace, rather than stress and exhaustion.

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