

QUIT THE FEED!

Social Media is the New Smoking – Why
We're Hooked and How to Break Free

HENRIETTE HOCHSTEIN-FRÄDRICH

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PREFACE

PREFACE: I'M OUT

It wasn't dramatic. No big announcement. No furious "I'm going offline!" followed by fanfare, likes, and a final wave of performative tear emojis in the feed. It was quiet. Very quiet.

At the end of 2024, I deleted every single social media app and account. Took one deep breath. And left. Just like that. Overnight. No strategy. No exit plan. Not out of anger. Not to make a statement. But out of a deep, internal longing for peace and freedom.

At some point, I realized something: The constant noise. The endless pinging. The scrolling. The watching. It wasn't making me more alive. It wasn't making me better. It wasn't good for me. It was draining me. I was full of it all, sick of it and at the same time starving for something that simply wasn't in there.

And then: silence. No more notifications jolting my nervous system. No more "just a quick scroll" that quietly stole an hour of my most valuable life. No more digital cigarette I kept reflexively placing between my thoughts. Instead: air, space, time, calm and clarity.

The first few days felt slightly unfamiliar. That's all. And then something happened that I didn't expect: I could hear myself again. My own thoughts and my own voice. I was no longer a spectator in everyone else's social media theater. And I was no longer performing my own slightly pathetic little show for others. I became and remain the main character in my own life again. It wasn't a loss – it was a gain. Not deprivation, but a gift.

This book is about exactly that: The illusion we mistake for reality. An addiction we have minimized and normalized for far too long. And the liberation that begins the moment we pull the plug.

The moment I left social media, something unexpected and honestly unbelievable happened: A productivity explosion, ideas started pouring in. And they didn't remain ideas: I implemented two major projects in parallel. I wrote this book and I have big plans for it. It's the result of countless conversations, observations, and personal decisions. I now speak about the social media exit in keynotes and seminars online and offline, nationally and internationally because I keep seeing the same questions arise everywhere: People sense that something isn't right. And many feel it deep down: We cannot continue like this. In 2025, I also built a B2B matching platform for the speaking industry: www.SpeakerMatching.com.

Two massive projects. And I am building them with a clarity, strength, joy, drive, energy, and focus I hadn't experienced in years. Before, I wasted enormous amounts of energy planning and managing social media content, not to mention the even more pointless consumption of other people's content that brought me absolutely nothing, not professionally and not personally. Realizing that in hindsight is shocking.

And it doesn't stop there. I now have more energy and resources for what actually matters: My family, my health, my fitness, my peace, sport, sleep, love, my dogs, movement, culture, adventures, friends, fun, nonsense. Well, that's what I call real life.

PREFACE

And the best part? I don't miss social media for a single second. In fact, thinking about it now feels like the cold cigarette smoke to someone who has just quit: unpleasant, stale, almost absurd in retrospect.

I'm out. And I promise you something: It's so much better out here than you think. This isn't about showing how superior or disciplined I am. What I want is to wave at you – laughing, free, happy from the other side. And to show you how good it feels over here.

Break on through to the other side.

Come over.

Take a run-up, and jump.

See you on the other side? I'm really looking forward to meeting you there!

Henriette Hochstein-Frädlich

May 2026

EAT THAT FROG! THE GAZE INTO THE ABUYSS

SOCIAL MEDIA IS LIKE SMOKING. AND SCIENCE INCREASINGLY SUPPORTS THAT COMPARISON.

Addiction by design. Addiction on purpose. Addiction with consequences. What sounds like a dramatic, provocative thesis is no longer just rhetoric. Social media interferes with your brain, your hormones, your behavior, like a cigarette between your thoughts.

Yes, I know what you're thinking. "Oh great. Another digital minimalist. Another anti-tech preacher telling me how terrible TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn are. Yawn." I get it. I thought the same thing for years. And still. Let's be brave for a moment. Let's actually look into the abyss. The real one. The ugly one. The one we usually swipe away, scroll past, drown in distractions. We're going to eat the frog. Rip off the bandage, slowly and painfully. And once we expose the wound, we'll treat it properly. With clarity, with dignity and with this book.

Frog? Abyss? Wound? Sounds too dramatic? Maybe. But here's the uncomfortable truth: Without drama, our attention systems barely react anymore. We are conditioned by outrage, exaggeration, and emotional hooks. Social media trained us that way. So yes I'm using intensity. The difference? This time it's not manipulation. It's reality. Social media is like smoking. And no, that's not just a metaphor. Science proves that.

Social Media Is Like Smoking. Really?

When the comparison first crossed my mind, I hesitated. Too bold? Too simplified? Too provocative? No. Too accurate. The parallels are not

subtle. They are unsettling. The craving. The short high. The crash. The reach for the next click. The cigarette has found its digital successor. It looks cleaner. It smells better. But it affects: Your brain. Your psychology. Your body. Your sense of self. And increasingly society itself.

Social media is as normalized today as toothpaste and Wi-Fi. But what happens when we scroll too much, too long, too mindlessly? A growing body of research links excessive social media use to many of the same health risks once clearly associated with cigarettes. This isn't just a fringe claim from digital dropouts. In 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy publicly called for warning labels on social media platforms similar to those on cigarette packages. Yes. Really. So the question is no longer absurd. Are social platforms harming us in ways comparable to tobacco? Let's examine the parallels:

- The brain: What happens to dopamine and reward circuitry?
- The psyche: How deep does the dependency go?
- The body: What do cortisol, sleep disruption, and chronic stress do to us?
- The soul: Why do we feel empty despite constant connection?
- Society: When did the digital cigarette become normal?

Ready? Reality check. Light version.

Neurological Effects: The Dopamine Carousel

Social media fires at your brain like a slot machine on steroids. Every like, every comment, every notification – mini dopamine hit. Dopamine is the neurotransmitter associated with reward and motivation. It's involved in pleasure but more importantly, in anticipation. It's the same reward system activated by nicotine, gambling, and certain drugs. Here's the catch: The more you stimulate it, the less sensitive it becomes. You need more content. More novelty. More scrolling. Longer sessions. Welcome to tolerance. And when you stop? Restlessness. Irritation. Emptiness. Withdrawal. Just like cigarettes.

Scroll. Like. Heart emoji. Comment. Dopamine. Likes become the cigarette break of the soul. What happens on your phone is not harmless entertainment. Neurologically, it's a real event. With every interaction cue a ping, a red notification bubble, a new post your reward circuitry activates. The nucleus accumbens often called the brain's reward center lights up. The same region implicated in substance addiction. You feel briefly elevated, validated, and seen. That's what makes it powerful – and addictive.

Platforms are engineered around this principle. Variable rewards, unpredictable reinforcement, and social validation on demand. They provide what humans are wired to seek: Belonging. Recognition. Status. But what you receive is not a genuine connection. It's a high-frequency substitute. Over time, these rapid, intense rewards disrupt natural dopamine regulation. Your brain adapts. It recalibrates. And slowly, it becomes less responsive to slower, healthier sources of satisfaction: Reading. Deep work. Long conversations. Nature. Silence. Real life starts to feel dull. Then comes the crash. When you stop scrolling, dopamine doesn't just return to baseline, it can temporarily dip below it. The result? That flat, agitated feeling when you put your phone down and think: "Something's missing." Morning coffee without your feed suddenly feels incomplete. That's not a coincidence. That's conditioning.

Researchers now describe classic addiction mechanisms in heavy social media use:

- Tolerance: increasing time and stimulation required for the same effect
- Withdrawal symptoms: irritability, anxiety, FOMO when disconnected
- Loss of control: repeated overuse despite negative consequences

Brain imaging studies suggest that excessive social media use may be associated with a "dopamine injection directly into the neural system." Or even more pointed: "The smartphone is the modern minimally in-

ing more and more. Just brilliant! Social media platforms do the same thing, just smarter. They promise fun, belonging, entertainment. And what do you get? Dependency. Overstimulation. Emotional exhaustion. Well, thanks for that.

Former tech insiders openly admit: The system was designed for maximum engagement, fast effect, high addiction potential and difficult withdrawal. An article summed it up drastically: “Social media seems like 15 cigarettes a day. It doubles loneliness, triples depression, interrupts sleep, improves addiction, fear and suicidalness.

Will social media become the new tobacco? Governments are slowly reacting. Age restrictions. Warning labels. Design regulations. The debate has started. Tech companies respond just like tobacco giants once did: When regulation tightens in one region, expand in another. Profit has no ethics. Your health? Not the priority.

Social Media Is Like Smoking. Really.

This is just the beginning. The first bite of the frog. The first look into the abyss. We’re going deeper. We’ll dissect everything: Brain. Heart. Phone. Hope. And then we rebuild. From the inside out.

Let’s summarize, no pink filters: Social media is not a harmless distraction. Not just cat videos. Not just sunsets. It acts deeply. On your brain. On your body. On your soul. Both smoking and social media: Activate the reward system. Create tolerance. Trigger withdrawal. Undermine mental health. Increase anxiety and depression. Disrupt the body’s balance. And attack the soul quietly.

Smoking delivered tar. Social media delivers dopamine spikes, comparison loops, overstimulation, chronic stress. Different smoke. Same mechanics. And just like back then with smoking: Wasn’t it the ads, the peer pressure and the coolness promises that made smoking so big? Just like today for TikTok, Instagram & the rest.

The good news? We changed our relationship to cigarettes. It took education, debate, and cultural shift. No one smokes on airplanes anymore. No one hands cigarettes to children. Why not do the same with our digital behavior? Why not make conscious offline time the norm? Become a digital non-smoker. It doesn't require banning smartphones. It requires awareness, education and personal responsibility.

If social media is the cigarette of our time, then maybe now is the moment to pause, to breathe, and to ask: Do we really want another drag? Or is it time to put it out?

NICOTINE & SOCIAL MEDIA: A BILLION-DOLLAR BUSINESS

Money is not the only currency. Your attention is. Welcome to the business model of invisible costs. While you scroll and slowly lose yourself, others cash in. Billions. The health consequences alone should already make you angry, right? Well then let's throw even more fuel into that fire. Because it gets worse. Much worse.

What does the economy gain from our addiction? A lot. Social media and the tobacco industry are Big Fat Business. Smoking is a billion-dollar market. Period. Major tobacco corporations like Philip Morris, British American Tobacco, or Altria generate gigantic revenues every single year, up to 80+ billion US dollars for individual companies. The global industry is scratching at the one-trillion-dollar mark. Growing. Especially in less regulated markets. Why? It's absurdly simple. Because nicotine is addictive. And every additional cigarette makes the cash registers ring. A deal at the expense of health but economically extremely lucrative.

What many people forget: Social media is also a billion-dollar business. Just more subtle. Disguised as a free service. No paywall. No price tag. But definitely not a harmless gift. Because while we scroll, like, post, and chat, we are paying. With our attention, our data, our time, and our well-being.

The parallels to the tobacco industry are disturbingly clear. Individual platforms like Meta (Facebook, Instagram) generate more than 160 billion dollars in revenue per year with profit margins that cigarette manufacturers would envy. ByteDance (TikTok) follows closely behind with over 120 billion dollars. The advertising industry pumps more than 300 billion dollars annually into the social media universe. And the return on investment? Maximum user retention. More screen time. More clicks. More revenue. It looks like another deal, but this time not at the

THE DOPAMINE THING

WHAT SOCIAL MEDIA DOES TO YOUR BRAIN

And now a little science. Why we become so addicted and why we already are. This is where it gets serious: Our brain. Because that is where the key lies.

Ping. Like. Comment. Another Reel. Our brain loves it. And every single time, it fires off a small shot of dopamine. The problem? It wants more. And more. And more. Social media does not make us happy, it makes us hungry. We are addicted to the short kick. But we are never full. Welcome to the digital feedback trap.

Social media is built so that we never arrive. No “Game won.” No “Goal achieved.” Instead: The endless feedback loop. A mechanism that keeps us in a permanent state of anticipation. You know the feeling: You see the red number on the app icon. Your heart beats faster. What could it be? A like? A comment? A message? Your brain releases dopamine in advance, in anticipation of the kick. And that is what makes you addicted. Not the like itself. But the prospect of it. This is classic conditioning. Exactly the same trick casinos use with slot machines: Variable reward schedules. Sometimes you win immediately. Sometimes you get nothing. Sometimes it takes twenty tries. That keeps you pulling the lever. And holding the phone. And staying in the feed.

The insidious part? Your brain thinks it is doing you a favor. But in reality, it is making you hungry. Hungry for the next ping. For the next Reel. Hungry for a satisfaction that never comes. Social media does not make us happy, it makes us dependent.

From Addiction to Biology

To truly understand this, we need to go deeper. Because this craving for more is not a bug. It is hardwired into your head. Our brain was built for hunting, for making fire, and for gathering berries. But certainly not for endless scrolling sessions. In the next chapter, we will look at how the reward system was originally designed and how social media hijacks it today.

THE REWARD SYSTEM

Our brain was built for hunting, making fire, and gathering berries, not for endless scrolling sessions. The dopaminergic system that once secured our survival is now being hijacked by platforms that know exactly how to stimulate it to the maximum. Likes replace the campfire, shares replace social bonding, and the algorithm becomes the ringmaster of your desire.

Our brain is old. Stone Age old. It was designed so we could hunt mammoths, make fire, and find a few sweet berries. Nothing more. The dopaminergic system, our internal reward center, was originally a brilliant survival tool. Every time we did something that secured our survival (eat, drink, have sex, form social bonds), we got a small dopamine hit. That ensured we would want to do it again. Practical. Simple. Life-saving. Genius.

The problem: Our brain does not distinguish between “good for you” and “well programmed.” It simply responds to the stimulus. And that part? Not so genius. Whether you find a berry, kiss your crush, or receive a like – the dopamine mechanism fires.

And that is exactly what social media platforms shamelessly exploit. They replace the berry with a heart icon. The campfire with a share button. Social closeness with follower counts. And suddenly, your tribe is no longer your center of gravity. Your feed is. And the algorithm becomes the trainer of your desire. It knows when to give you sugar so you come back. It knows when to let you squirm so you check again even more often. Your dopaminergic system is run like a trained dog through a course: Sit. Like. Stay. Share. The result? Your brain fires as if you had just discovered a sensational berry field on a Stone Age meadow. Except today it does not secure your survival. It fills your screen. And while your brain celebrates, your real life shrinks. Something is seriously off.

THE GREAT WITHDRAWAL: 5 HOURS. 5 STEPS.

A mental exit program for everyone who wants out – without relapse, without drama. Clear. Doable. Radical. No finger-wagging. No digital-detox romantic clichés. Just a liberation act. Now things get concrete and practical – inspired by the old master of quitting addictions, Allen Carr. But instead of cigarettes, we’re letting go of likes, scrolls, and reels. All with clarity, humor, depth and a plan.

Welcome to the heart of this book! Up to this point you’ve understood how the addiction works. You’ve seen what it does to you. You’ve uncovered the lies that keep us trapped in the system. And now comes the moment when knowledge turns into action.

This is not another digital-detox calendar with thirty challenges like: “Try spending an evening without your phone.” This is the radical and final exit. Full stop. No half-hearted attempts. No romantic “I’ll just take a little break.” No countdown until the relapse. Just: Stop. Game over. That’s it.

“The Great Withdrawal” is your exit program. Five hours. Five steps. A liberation act. Clear. Practical. Radical. No raised finger. No esoteric nonsense. No self-optimization kitsch. Just pragmatic, realistic steps, full of aha moments.

You’ll experience what it feels like to make the cut. You’ll be guided through the first hours, the first day, the first week. You’ll get tools, mental images, and small hacks that carry you through the shaky moments. And yes: You’ll sweat. You’ll doubt. You might curse a little. But

you'll realize something important: It works.

The inspiration comes from Allen Carr's famous book "The Easy Way to Stop Smoking." Only here, we're not putting down a cigarette. We're putting down the feed. No cigarettes but likes, stories, and reels. But the principle is the same: The moment you understand that you're not losing anything but gaining everything – the withdrawal stops feeling like punishment. It becomes freedom, and even a reward. This part is hands-on. Here you get the blueprint, your roadmap, and the mental tutorial. You'll learn how to make the cut, how to recognize relapse patterns, and how to redirect your energy from "getting pulled back in again and again" to "finally thinking freely again."

Five hours. Five steps. That's all it takes. It will be intense. It will be honest. It will be powerful. And in the end you'll understand and experience for yourself: Leaving is not only possible, it's easier than you think.

Your Withdrawal Roadmap: 5 Hours, 5 Steps

Before we begin, here's your clear schedule for the Great Withdrawal. A roadmap that gives you orientation immediately before we dive into the individual steps. Because this isn't a marathon over weeks. Not an endless "let's see how long I can last." The Great Withdrawal works through a clear, compact process. Five hours. Five steps. And you're out. After that you're not waiting for failure, you're arriving in your new life.

Hour 1: Laying the Mental Foundation

What you need isn't an app timer. You need an inner attitude. In the first hour, it's about clarity. You understand why you really want out. What you gain. And why this is not a loss but a win. Here you build the foundation that will carry you through the withdrawal.

Hour 2: The Moment of Liberation

The click. The knot loosening. The racing heartbeat. At some point it happens: The moment when the penny drops. Suddenly you see social

media clearly. Not as a friend but as a chain. This realization isn't accidental, it's the turbo boost for your decision.

Hour 3: Your Final Day – The Live Scroll Protocol

One last dive in – and then never again. Before you pull the plug, you scroll consciously. Not as a consumer, but as an observer. You document what happens, how you feel, how the loops try to pull you back in. This last look is like an X-ray. Afterwards you will see the feed with completely different eyes.

Hour 4: The Cut

Logout. Delete. Uninstall. The end. This is the actual withdrawal moment. The goodbye with intention. There are no half-measures here. No notifications. No backup accounts. No "I'll just deactivate it for now" only to sneak back in later and get trapped again. Just a clean cut. And it will hurt far less than you think.

Hour 5: The First Hour After

And then: Silence. A tingling feeling. Freedom! Your fingers twitch. Your hand reaches into empty space. This is the moment when everything begins again. The first hour without scrolling feels strange, but also exciting. And right here your new life begins.

After that come the first day. The first week. The first month. But the real detox happens in these five steps. They are the bridge out of the matrix.