

HABITS DESTROYING YOUR HEALTH AND HOW TO BREAK THEM IN 2026

By Richard Ategeka

If you live in Uganda today, you already know: Life moves fast, money disappears quickly, sleep is optional and your phone is practically glued to your hand.

It is common to juggle side hustles, jump from one WhatsApp group to another, grumble over little things or hold grudges and pretend all's well.

These habits do not just waste time; they erode one's mental, emotional and physical health.

Experts now say breaking these every day, "harmless" behaviours may be one of the most powerful ways to reset for the new year.

Below are the most common ones, backed by science and how to realistically shed them in 2026.

Before diving in, the global trends paint a clear picture: The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that over one billion people worldwide live with mental health conditions, especially anxiety and depression.

The 2024 Ipsos World Mental Health Day Report shows that 62% of the respondents across 31

countries have felt stressed to the point it affects their daily life.

A *Talker Research* survey found that 70% of Americans say their financial anxiety is at an all-time high.

A meta-analysis on digital addiction reports smartphone addiction at nearly 27%, social media (17%) and internet (14%).

These global issues shape how people feel, think and live and they are mirrored in our everyday habits.

PHONE ADDICTION

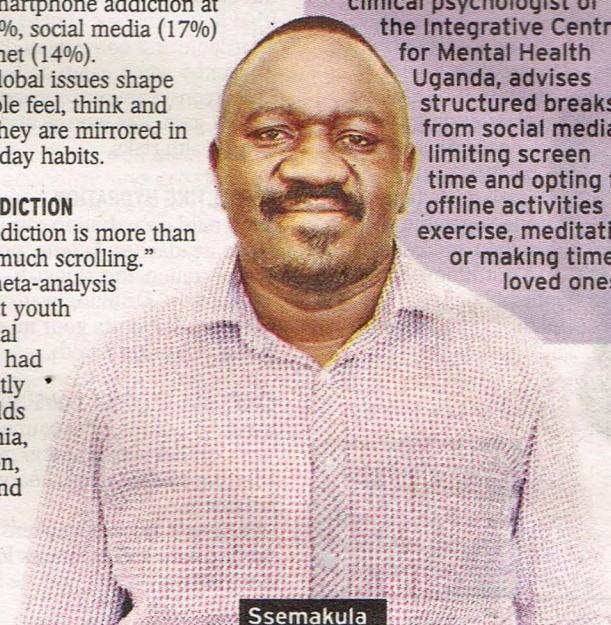
Digital addiction is more than just "too much scrolling."

A 2024 meta-analysis found that youth with digital addiction had significantly higher odds of insomnia, depression, anxiety and stress.

WHO reports rising

SOCIAL MEDIA BREAKS

To protect mental balance, Moses Ssemakula, the executive director and lead clinical psychologist of the Integrative Centre for Mental Health Uganda, advises structured breaks from social media, limiting screen time and opting for offline activities like exercise, meditation or making time for loved ones.



Ssemakula

problematic social media behaviour among adolescents; in some regions, up to 11% struggle to control their usage.

Maybe you check your phone as the first thing in the morning, or you scroll at night, until your eyes burn and then feel guilty, but you can break that pattern.

Set "phone-free" windows (e.g., first 30 minutes after awaking, last hour before bed), use app timers or digital-wellness tools and replace bedtime scrolling with reading, meditation or journaling.

To understand how serious this has become, Moses Ssemakula, the executive director and lead clinical psychologist of the Integrative Centre for Mental Health Uganda, says Problematic Smartphone Use (PSU) has quietly become one of the fastest-growing behavioural challenges.

PSU, known for excessive time on phones, leads to habits, such as anger, restlessness or anxiety when the device is not available.

Ssemakula says more adults than ever are struggling with patterns marked by cravings, withdrawal-like

symptoms and loss of control over screen time.

Ssemakula says Uganda's low-cost mobile data culture has intensified this challenge, with bundles as cheap as sh250 and the temptation to "just check quickly" has evolved into compulsive, habitual scrolling.

"People scroll aimlessly on their phones even when it's not alerting them," says Ssemakula.

"Habitual checking becomes automatic and that's when it starts showing the addiction symptoms."

Looking ahead, he predicts a sharp rise in phone overuse during Uganda's 2026 election period.

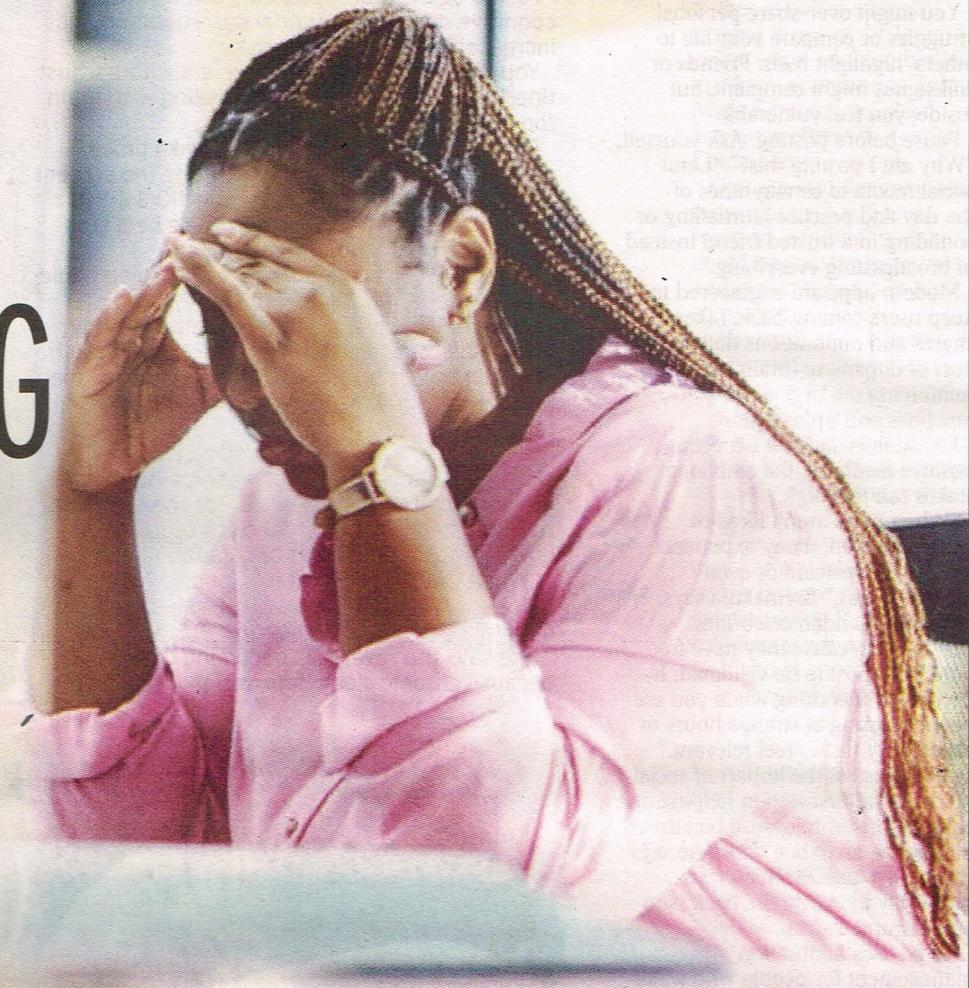
"Election seasons are emotionally charged," Ssemakula says.

"People stay glued to their phones for every update and prolonged exposure to political tension can cause chronic stress, sleep disruption and burnout."

OVERSHARING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

As phone usage grows, another subtle habit has taken root.

Sharing too much – whether



Juggling multiple jobs or side hustles may be admirable, but it leads to burnout, anxiety and family disconnection

Continued on page 18

DITCH THESE HABITS TO BOOST YOUR HEALTH IN 2020

From page 100

out of habit, validation-seeking, or loneliness – can hurt private life and emotional well-being as it builds dependence on external approval, which undermines genuine self-esteem.

You might over-share personal struggles or compare your life to others' highlight reels. Friends or colleagues might comment, but inside, you feel vulnerable.

Pause before posting. Ask yourself, "Why am I posting this?" "Limit social media to certain times of the day and practice journaling or confiding in a trusted friend instead of broadcasting everything."

Modern apps are engineered to keep users coming back. Likes, shares and notifications deliver quick hits of dopamine (brain chemical), reinforcing the urge to refresh timelines and upload more.

For adults who post expecting positive feedback, the emotional stakes can feel high.

"When posts aren't liked or commented on, many experience a dip in self-esteem or even worthlessness," Ssemakula says.

"Some Ugandan celebrities don't post because they have free time; they post to be validated. It becomes concerning when you see people posting at strange hours or excessively just to feel relevant."

Awareness of the impact of social media is the first step in helping one change consumption/use patterns.

"Track your screen time," he says.

Excessive use also manifests physically in eye strain, back pain and disrupted sleep.

He advises notification management for people who wake up at night just to attend to their phones.

"Addiction is driven by interruptions. Limit what pops up on your screen."

Ssemakula says some apps are engineered specifically to consume time and they should be uninstalled or disabled if they are eating into your natural life.

Poor sleep is the most common side effect of digital overuse, he says.

Phone light exposure suppresses melatonin, delays sleep and, over time, increases the risk of insomnia.

Beyond that, the constant need to stay updated fuels the fear of missing out, a powerful driver of anxiety and depressive symptoms.

COMPARING YOURSELF TO OTHERS

The comparison culture is another quiet habit deepened by social media and constantly measuring yourself against curated images breeds envy, low self-esteem and discontent.

WHO data shows problematic social media use rising, making comparison behaviour even more common.

You scroll through others people's success, looks, or relationships and feel inadequate.

Unfollow accounts that trigger

SHORT-CHANGING SLEEP

Beyond the digital habits, one of the most underestimated problems today is poor sleep. Sleep Foundation research recommends at least seven hours for adults for optimal physical and mental health.

Falling below that repeatedly can lead to cognitive decline, emotional dysregulation and increased chronic disease risk.

You think you can run on five or six hours "just fine," but by midweek, you're dealing with brain fog or mood swings.

Prioritise consistent sleep and wake times, create a soothing wind-down routine (no screens one hour before bed), and try the "10-3-2-1-0" method: no caffeine 10 hours before bed, stop work two hours before going to bed.

Sleep specialists warn that chronic sleep neglect is silently eroding well-being.

Carolyn Busingye, a sleep specialist at Addy Memorial Hospital in Kampala, says most adults still fail to meet the recommended seven to nine hours each night, exposing themselves to long-term health risks.

Busingye says inconsistent sleep patterns, shifting bedtimes, irregular wake-up hours and weekend "catch-up" sleep disrupt the circadian rhythm, the body's internal clock regulating energy, mood, hormones and metabolism.

"When this rhythm is stable, people fall asleep more easily, wake up feeling refreshed and maintain better overall health," Busingye says.

She says the reverse is becoming common because chronic sleep deprivation weakens the

immune system and increases the likelihood of weight gain, high blood pressure, heart disease and mental-health disorders.

"Over time, poor sleepers experience anxiety, low mood, dips in concentration, memory lapses and slower decision-making, a state compared to 'functioning on a fogged-up brain.'

A worrying trend, Busingye says, is the growing number of people who insist they can survive on five or six hours of sleep.

Research strongly contradicts the belief of sleeping less than five hours a night as it impairs the brain, similarly to being legally drunk.

Only about 1% of the population has a rare gene enabling them to function normally on minimal sleep.

Busingye stresses the importance of simple, intentional habits of reducing screen exposure before bed, maintaining a regular sleep schedule, limiting afternoon caffeine, dimming lights in the evening and keeping the bedroom cool.

Many of her clients benefit from quiet pre-bed routines such as reading, stretching, light journaling or prayer.

For those recovering from "always-on" lifestyles, the specialist recommends a gradual reset of consistent wake-up times, restful pauses during the day, reduced evening stimulation and making space for wind-down rituals.

"Rest is not a luxury," she says.

"It is a core pillar of well-being and a biological necessity. When we honour it, the mind and body naturally return to healthier rhythms."



Having adequate sleep improves your health

negative self-talk, celebrate your own milestones (big or small) and remember your journey is unique.

CONSTANT DIET CHANGES

Outside digital and sleep habits, experts warn that physical health patterns also contribute to daily stress.

Frequent shifts in fad diets and cleanses, extreme restrictions or detox routines often backfire.

They stress your metabolism, disrupt your gut and worsen the mood.

Nutrition experts warn that rapid diet changes may undermine long-term

health, more than any single "bad" meal.

One week you are on ketogenic diet, the next on intermittent fasting, then a juice cleanse. It becomes a never-ending cycle.

Focus on sustainable, balanced eating. Set small goals (e.g., add one vegetable serving a day) and consult a nutritionist for a flexible, customised plan.



Overconsumption of junk food contributes to weight gain, low energy and long-term health risks

OVERCONSUMPTION OF FAST FOODS

Street snacks like rolex, chips, deep-fried foods and sweetened drinks are affordable and convenient, but often unhealthy when eaten daily.

Overconsumption contributes to weight gain, low energy and long-term health risks.

NEGLECTING HYDRATION

Even mild dehydration can cause headaches, fatigue, poor concentration and sluggish metabolism. Drinking water consistently boosts your mood, energy and skin health.

EXCESSIVE ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

Uganda is among the countries with high alcohol consumption rates, affecting health, sleep, finances and judgment.

Excessive alcohol weakens productivity and increases long-term disease risk.

PROCRASTINATION

Procrastination builds stress, guilt and poor performance. It is not laziness, often it is discomfort avoidance.

You delay conversations, projects or personal investments because they feel overwhelming.

Break tasks into small steps, use time-blocking and practice self-compassion.

FINANCIAL DISCIPLINE

With the rising living costs, money habits also shape daily mental health.

Many people avoid facing their finances, leading to debt, impulse buying and the "broke mid-month" cycle.

With unpredictable expenses, avoiding money conversations can worsen stress.

TAKE TIME TO RECHARGE

People take pride in being constantly busy, but chronic overworking leads to burnout and weak boundaries.

You respond to emails at midnight, skip rest days or feel guilty when not being "productive".

Redefine productivity: Health, rest, and joy count too. Set strict work/rest boundaries.

LIVING IN SURVIVAL MODE

Juggling multiple jobs or side hustles may be admirable, but long-term survival mode leads to burnout, anxiety and family disconnection.

Some people depend on luck more than planning believing prayer or "vibes" will fix things, instead of budgeting or setting micro-goals.

IGNORING HEALTH CHECK-UPS

Many people only visit hospitals when very sick. Skipping dental check-ups, HIV testing, blood pressure monitoring and cancer screenings is common, yet preventative care saves lives.

TIME MISMANAGEMENT AND NOISE

Endless group chats, negative gossip, rumour-spreading and unverified news increase anxiety and drain emotional energy.

Being chronically late, skipping deadlines or doing last-minute work all contribute to stress and poor professionalism.

OVER-PROMISING AND NOT DELIVERING

Many people over-promise and fail to fulfil commitments, saying they will call back, claiming they are "on the way," or asking for transport money and failing to show up. This erodes trust and strains relationships.

HOLDING GRUDGES

Harbouring resentment is linked to higher stress hormones, poor sleep and emotional exhaustion. Practice private forgiveness (journaling, meditation), seek therapy.

As we enter 2020, shedding these habits may be one of the most powerful ways to reset mentally, emotionally and physically.