

HOW I USE GENAI FOR DIGITAL THRIVING AND HOW YOU CAN, TOO

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Insights from a fellowship year at the Center for Digital Thriving at Harvard Graduate School of Education

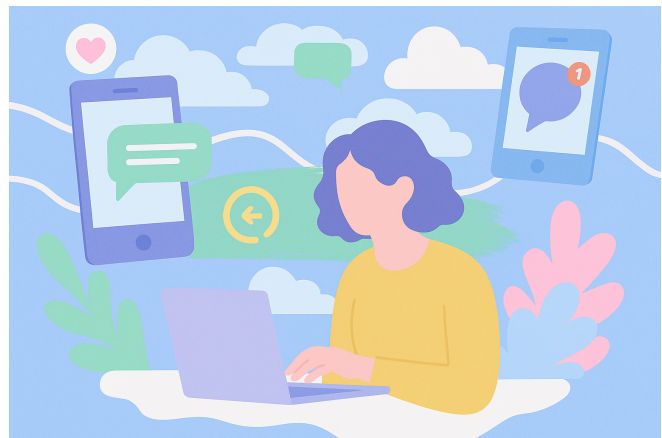
"A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."

In a 1971 lecture at Johns Hopkins, Herbert Simon described the emerging problem of information overload through the lens of economics. In a world rich with information, he observes, attention becomes a scarce resource to be allocated wisely.

Half a century later, Simon's insight underpins our attention economy. The amount of available information has grown exponentially, while human attention has not. Knowledge workers rely on sustained focus to understand complex ideas and move them forward, yet the digital tools meant for progress and convenience often have the opposite effect. Personalized feeds, infinite scroll, and constant alerts fracture attention and derail progress.

The gap between the knowledge available and the attention required to interpret and act on it can feel disempowering, leaving us overstimulated yet under-fulfilled.

If the smartphone era strained our ability to manage attention, the rise of Generative AI presents an unexpected counterforce.



Simon himself imagined "information systems" that would digest, condense, and summarize knowledge to support human judgment. He writes, "Progress depends on extracting patterns so less information needs to be read or written...devising better and more powerful thinking programs for man and machine." (Simon, 1971).

Fifty years later, large language models like ChatGPT are testing that vision.

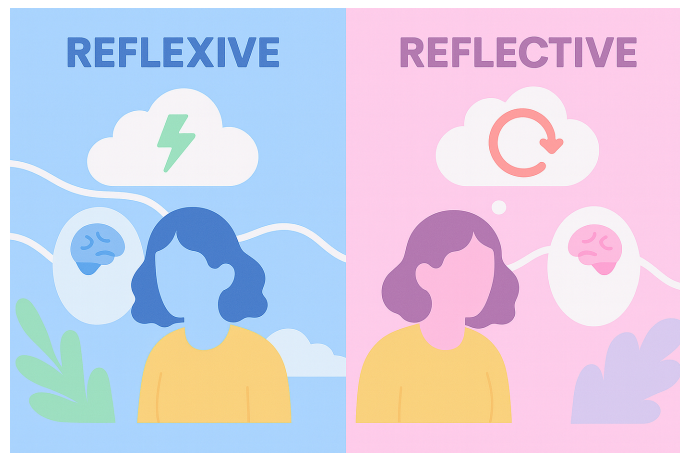
During my fellowship year at the Center for Digital Thriving at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, I explored the unique challenges and affordances Generative AI introduces for digital wellbeing. When used thoughtfully, GenAI has the potential to offset some of the unintended consequences of the smartphone era. This moment is also an opportunity to treat wellbeing as a core priority in new platform development, rather than an afterthought.

Two Forms of Human Intelligence

In his book *The Atomic Human*, Neil Lawrence distinguishes between two fundamental forms of intelligence that are unique to humans:

- Reflexive: fast, automatic, task-driven
- Reflective: slow, deliberate, meaning-making

The digital age, despite its many advances, has challenged both. We live in a high-stimulation, reactive environment where both executing tasks and finding meaning can feel like an uphill battle.



Growing up in the middle of the smartphone revolution, I experienced these changes firsthand and viscerally. That formative experience left me acutely sensitive to how technology reshapes our thought patterns and cognition. I view the current wave of technological change through this lens – seeing both its potential to address pitfalls from the last era, and the need to avoid creating new ones.

At the reflexive level, GenAI can restore a crucial sense of cohesion to our work. The smartphone era fragmented our attention and made deep work harder, leading to constant multitasking, context switching, and lower-quality output. GenAI offers a meaningful corrective: it lowers the barrier to completion, unblocks tedious or avoided tasks, and removes small friction points to regain momentum and execute with greater clarity and focus.

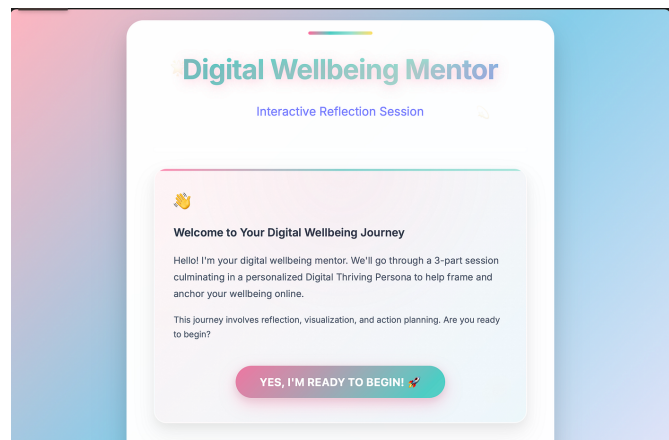
Moreover, GenAI can foster reflective thinking. In a digital world that operates on surface-level stimulation, it is increasingly vital to acknowledge the deeper reasons behind our actions. It's easier than ever to live in a default, half-aware state of scrolling and constant reactivity. We feel “busy” but lack clear intent, unless we deliberately name our goals and choose to pursue them daily. When thoughtfully used, GenAI can enhance reflective thinking by facilitating a new form of introspection, helping us retain a clear sense of purpose, which is essential to thriving (Ryff, 2014).

GenAI as a Facilitator of Reflective Introspection

In my early days experimenting with LLMs, I noticed their ability to produce “aha” moments by helping me put words to thoughts, feelings, and intuitions that I hadn't articulated yet. I found using AI as a collaborator in self-expression and exploration to be unexpectedly thought-provoking. Exercising judgment was essential to the process: the conversational chat interface allowed me to continuously evaluate and refine the model's outputs. I could discern between what rang true and what didn't, and guide the response to accurately reflect my thoughts.

Back when I was a teenager navigating the rapid rise of social media, I'd intuitively leaned on my core values and deeper purpose to persevere through some of my most challenging periods of academic stress. I wanted to help today's youth do the same. This was the vision behind the [Digital Wellbeing Mentor](#) I built during my fellowship year at the Center for Digital Thriving.

To inform the tool's development, I conducted dozens of interviews with youth, asking about their daily tech use, the challenges they face (distraction, FOMO, information overload, struggles with deep thinking), and what types of support would actually help. These conversations informed the right questions to ask, and which issues to address.



I also spoke with leaders in the coaching space on how AI was changing their practice. One such leader was Professor [Akihiko Morita](#), whose interdisciplinary lens bridging ancient wisdom traditions, coaching, and human-AI dialogue stood out. He recently published a [paper](#) on the role of AI in coaching where he states,

"Co-creative dialogue with AI constitutes a novel form of reflective practice and gives rise to a new kind of relationship, distinct from human-to-human interaction." (Morita, 2025).

This is a helpful lens to view human-AI interactions through: a co-creative dialogue that enables a new type of reflective practice.

Synthesizing these insights revealed a gap between students' ability to identify issues in their digital lives and translating this awareness into change. Through rounds of prototyping and testing, I experimented with ways to bridge reflection and action.

The resulting tool is a three-part reflection session powered by Claude AI in the form of an experienced digital wellbeing mentor. The process unfolds in three stages:

1. Reflect on your digital life – Users examine their current digital habits, identify areas of misalignment, and articulate what they'd like to change.
2. Visualize your ideal digital state – A guided visualization that walks users through an ideal digital day, helping them identify activities they find truly fulfilling and the core values underlying them.
3. Translate insight into action – Users identify clear goals, define what success looks like, and pinpoint what motivates them and the conditions that support follow-through.

The Digital Thriving Persona: Making Thinking Visible

At the end of the session, the user's reflections are synthesized into a comprehensive Digital Thriving Persona: a concrete, visual snapshot of their core motivations, values, and growth areas related to their digital life.



Ultimately, building this tool was an exercise in understanding how technology can enhance human agency. By combining slow, introspective thought with AI's dynamic generative capabilities, we can create new and powerful ways of knowing ourselves. Thoughtfully designed GenAI tools can deepen reflective intelligence, enabling people to gain clarity and act with greater intention in their digital lives.

What We Must Protect: Cognitive Integrity

Just as the smartphone revolution led to unintended consequences for our mental wellbeing, we must be intentional in avoiding similar consequences with AI. Although we often default to automating difficult processes, it is important that we do not automate the process of mental effort, or thinking.

Effortful thought is a developmental necessity. It is the process by which we learn to make decisions, persevere through challenges, grow through failure, reflect, and ultimately, become more fully ourselves. Mental effort builds our sense of agency and identity, which are foundations for human flourishing. Critical thinking abilities, such as intention, judgement, interpreting information against our values, and reflection – are essential to healthy development and deeply tied to meaning and fulfillment (Bandura, 2001).

When I visited my old high school in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan to run focus groups, I noticed that students sensed this tension intuitively. They expressed worry that using GenAI for assignments was compromising their learning:

"I'm worried about whether I'm processing the information enough. I want to learn, so I consciously avoid using [GenAI] when I can."

Students instinctively sense when technology undermines their development, but there remains a gap between knowing something feels off and knowing what to do about it. Moving forward, my goal is to build technology that is developmentally-supportive by design, rather than tools that require constant willpower to resist. Equally important is helping students develop literacy around how technology shapes their cognition, so they can make more informed choices about when and how they use it.

Why Thinking Is Essential to Community

Thinking isn't just an individual act – it's how we build genuine connection with others. The practices of reading and writing sharpen our capacity to:

- Structure our thoughts into coherent, organized ideas
- Articulate ourselves authentically in real time
- Understand and respond thoughtfully to others' perspectives

These are core ways we allow ourselves to be seen and known authentically by others – a deeply human need.

If we let GenAI outsource the work of reading, writing, and thinking, we risk losing the practice of self-expression – of wrestling with what we really think, deciding how we want to say it, and sharing it meaningfully with others in conversation.

Looking Ahead

One of the Center for Digital Thriving's core [values](#) is Critical Optimism. I am hopeful that GenAI can restore some of the agency that we lost in the smartphone era. I've seen it help people get unstuck, regain momentum, and surface insights they didn't have words for.

I've also seen how easily it is misused: as a shortcut around learning, a substitute for reflection, and a way to avoid constructive friction. As we saw in the smartphone revolution, convenience is not synonymous with fulfillment. Protecting the integrity of our thinking is of utmost importance for a future that strengthens our wellbeing.

Contrary to sensationalized media claims, GenAI is neither a panacea nor an existential crisis. It raises real environmental, workforce, and social questions we're actively navigating as a society. Still, I find it worthwhile to share the concrete ways it's strengthened my agency and digital wellbeing in hopes that others can experience the same benefits. As we navigate the fine line GenAI presents between augmentation and replacement of thinking, I encourage its use to improve execution and deepen reflection while retaining intention and judgment – these are not mutually exclusive. I hope you will leverage its power to create in new ways while still doing the hard work of knowing and deciding what you want to say.

I'm grateful to the Center for Digital Thriving at Harvard's Graduate School of Education for creating the space that has made this exploration possible. My next challenge is investigating how AI tools can be designed to support learning and cognitive development by strengthening cognitive literacy – helping young people understand how digital systems shape attention, judgment, and reflection.

I often think about my 15-year-old self – sitting in the high school library, holding a new smartphone, feeling my attention change in ways I didn't have language for yet. I want to be the person who walks alongside her through this new era of AI: preserving what's essential to humankind while harnessing the best of what these tools can do.

If we can protect our cognitive integrity while embracing AI, the next wave of technology doesn't have to repeat the mistakes of the last. It can help us focus, reflect, communicate, and ultimately, thrive.

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