



# 10 Tips to Beat Technophobia

## Seniors can conquer their fears and start enjoying online technology

Today's twenty-somethings may soon be getting Facebook friend requests from an unexpected source—their grandparents. Surveys show that people over 65 are adopting the Internet faster than any other age group. The Pew Research Center found that the number of seniors using social networking sites doubled from 13 to 26 percent between April 2009 and May 2010. And according to a 2011 ComScore survey, an estimated 483,600 American seniors own an iPad.

While seniors' online presence is growing, they remain—for better or worse—the age group most grounded in real life. Only 42 percent of Americans over 65 use the Internet (versus 78 percent of all Americans), Pew reported in 2011. The good news: it's both possible and worth the effort for seniors to learn their way around cyberspace. In fact, research shows that once they make the leap, older people are typically enthusiastic emailers, networkers, and searchers who spend just as much time online as younger users.

### Perks of Being Online

For seniors, learning just a few Internet basics can open up a world of benefits. Email and social networking help combat isolation by connecting them with friends and loved ones. Many seniors use the Web to search for health information and access management tools for chronic conditions like diabetes. Music and video streaming provide instant entertainment. And as more and more organizations switch to paperless communication, seniors may need to log in to track their bank accounts, investments, and insurance benefits.



There's even evidence that surfing the Web improves brain function and fights aging-related cognitive decline. A UCLA study of regular Internet users aged 55 to 76 found that performing online searches increased the subjects' brain activity even more than reading. Gains were especially high in brain areas governing decision-making and complex reasoning.

### Barriers to Technology Use

Given all these benefits, why do a majority of seniors shy away from technology? The answer probably has less to do with fear than with physical barriers. Aging-related changes in vision, coordination, and dexterity make it hard for some older people to see a screen or use a keyboard or mouse. Furthermore, many technology companies fail to consider the needs of older people when designing new products.

Cognitive changes may also exacerbate seniors' aversion to technology. As the brain ages, its ability to adapt to new routines declines, while the person's fund of established skills and knowledge

continues to grow. Understandably, many seniors would rather rely on their strengths than invest time and effort in learning new technology.

Finally, seniors who have had frustrating experiences with technology in the past may be reluctant to try again. Just a few years ago, uploading photos or syncing an MP3 player required dozens of steps. The development of plug-and-play devices and intuitive interfaces has made computers far more user-friendly but many seniors remain distrustful.



### How to Help Seniors You Know

Seniors are more likely to adopt new technology when friends or family members help them through the initial learning curve. When introducing an older person to a new program or gadget, spend lots of time using it together to build the person's confidence. In addition, try these strategies:

- 1. Keep it simple.** There's no need to buy a desktop for someone who just wants to email and do occasional Web surfing. Tablet computers are ideal for first-timers because of their simple design and intuitive, touch-screen interface.
- 2. Go computer-less.** These days, seniors don't need to log in to stay in the loop. Computer-less systems like Celery and Presto allow users to receive cards, photos, and emailed messages automatically through a printer or fax machine.
- 3. Increase accessibility.** Software packages like BigScreenLive and PointerWare transform a busy screen into an easy-to-navigate, large-text interface that makes email and photo sharing a breeze. PointerWare is touch-screen compatible, making it ideal for users with arthritis or limited dexterity.
- 4. Write instructions down.** After introducing a new skill, leave a simple list of steps the person can refer to while practicing.
- 5. Offer generous tech support.** Seniors will be more likely to invest time and effort in technology when they know someone is available to help with problems and answer questions.

Above all, have fun showing your loved one how technology can make life easier and more fun. Relate your teaching to the person's needs and interests, whether that means streaming music, scheduling doctor appointments, or viewing photos of the grandkids.



---

**ONLY 42%**  
of Americans over 65 use  
the Internet (versus 78  
percent of all Americans).

Source: Pew Research Center

---



### Are You a Technophobe?

If you're a senior experiencing technophobia, you can combat some of the fears and frustrations with these tips:

- 1. Put the kids to work.** Your children and grandchildren will likely enjoy teaching you new tech skills, especially if they will help the two of you stay in touch.
- 2. Keep it in the family.** Choose the same type of computer or device that your friends and family members own. This will make it easier to get help by phone if you have trouble.
- 3. Try a touch screen.** If you have trouble using a traditional computer, consider a tablet like the iPad. The touch screen and large icons make it easy to navigate, even if you have arthritis or limited hand dexterity.
- 4. Start slowly.** Tackle one goal at a time. Start with rewarding tasks like video chatting with family members or playing music.
- 5. Consider a class.** Many libraries, community colleges, and continuing education centers offer low-cost computer education programs especially for seniors.