

How to ... fix a computer

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When your computer fails, it's like being returned instantly to the 70s. Post Offices, record players and board games become important again. You then have three options: the first is to buy a new computer; the second is to embrace a preindustrial lifestyle; the third is to attempt to fix it. Of the three the last is the most expensive, most stressful and least likely to succeed. The most effective way to fix a computer is to restart it. This is the technical equivalent of a detox weekend. It's important to switch the power right off, and that doesn't mean pushing only the button on the front, it means shutting down the power to the whole street.

One of the main causes of breakdown is that computers and printers hate each other. The causes of conflict are: computer won't talk to printer; printer ignores computer; computer has never heard of printer; printer doesn't take computer seriously; computer recognises other printers you don't have. Losing your internet connection is the big fear of all computer users. Fortunately there are lots of online help sites that will give you all the information you need to get back online. That's as helpful as having drive-through car repair centres. If you can't get online, you may have to speak to a computer expert. Sadly, computer experts aren't usually good at speaking, especially not to other human beings. Technical support lines will ask you to restart your computer and, when that fails, they will talk you through every stage of taking your computer apart and welding in a few new bits. When you have your computer in 17 bits on the carpet, the phone helpline will go dead.

That's why a vital accessory to any computer is a friendly techie. Techies know that as long as your machine is down, you are in their power. They will use this brief window of popularity to make impossible demands such as pizza, coffee and marriage. A techie's first question is always, "Have you backed up your data?" This is to highlight the fact that they automatically back up their own data every 30 seconds. It's also to warn you that the resuscitation technique they're about to employ will wipe everything from your computer for ever. Guardian Unlimited © Guardian News and Media Limited 2007 Source: Guardian