

Smartphone Addiction and Misuse

Addictions can take many shapes. Traditionally, we think of controlled substances when we speak about addiction, whether it be legally obtained prescription drugs, illegally obtained controlled substances, or more socially acceptable substances like alcohol or cigarettes. Allowing the definition to expand a bit further, we can see addictions to certain activities, such as gambling and video-gaming. These tendencies tend to be easily recognized by others as issues. However, for a huge number of people, an addiction they are experiencing is hiding right under their noses. It contributes to decreased social interaction and attention span, poor sleeping quality, and has comorbidity with depression and anxiety. This is, of course, cell phone addiction.

Cell phones are completely ubiquitous in our society. According to Pew Research Center, 97% of people in America own a cell phone. For many, it's their only method of connecting to others or the internet. This reliance makes it exceedingly easy to form very large habits of using phones at all times and for everything. On top of this, while not necessarily the fault of the phone itself, the apps on smartphones are designed in such a way that they're meant to force your brain into creating as much dopamine as possible. They do this to boost the amount of time you spend on their app which increases the amount of advertiser dollars they earn. Unfortunately for the user, this has a side effect of teaching your brain that it feels better whenever a phone is in your hand. The stronger this association grows, the more time you'll tend to devote to your phone, leading to further addiction and higher usage, in a feedback loop. If this cycle of use sounds familiar, it may be because it mimics the cycle of addiction that any other substance user would experience. This is because the apps on smartphones prey on the same receptors that most addictive substances do, in order to make us keep coming back for more.

The consequences of cell phone addictions can be subtle, but without proper care they can build up into large, long-lasting effects. First and foremost, excessive smartphone usage is associated with increased loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Despite the nonstop connection that phones advertise, the effects of prolonged usage tend to actually make people feel less connected. Constantly comparing themselves to those on social media and fears of missing out on what is happening on their phone both add to the stress that smart phones can cause, particularly in teens. While these are the biggest concerns of smart phone misuse, others include:

- Worsening attention deficit disorders – Particularly for those who already have difficulty with attention, the impact of perpetually being bombarded with messages and notifications can add to their difficulties with attention.
- Sleep cycle disturbances – For many, especially youth, their phone is the first thing they touch when they wake up. While this may be less disruptive in the mornings, when one wakes up in the middle of the night and scrolls on their phone, their sleep cycle is being heavily disrupted. Blue light from phone screens can make it difficult to sleep properly after opening a phone, and while the sleep cycle can resume somewhat easily after a normal wake-up, attempting to resume it after giving attention to a phone can be much more difficult

- Struggles thinking creatively – For many tasks that require deep thought and creativity, a smart phone makes it difficult to acquire true focus on the task and find new solutions to problems requiring thorough thought and creative problem solving.

This addiction can be hard to define. After all, most everybody needs a cell phone in order to function well in the today's world. Signs and symptoms of cell phone addiction can include:

- Lying about use
- Excessive usage
- Difficulty completing duties at school, work, or home
- Repeatedly checking the same things out of anxiety (such as friends' profiles, Twitter feeds, the news)
- Feeling of lack of connection, despite frequent use
- Anger, anxiety, irritation, or other emotional concerns when use is interrupted
- Waking up repeatedly to use devices
- Checking devices immediately whenever left alone or bored
- Cravings when unable to use
- Anxiety when devices aren't within a close distance

It's important to remember that addictions can look different for everyone. Particularly with usage time, a problematic number can be different for everyone. Two people may both spend six hours on their phone a day, but if one is making conscious choices about what they do on their device, and maintaining an ability to put it down, they likely aren't suffering from an addiction. On the other hand, if someone finds themselves mindlessly scrolling TikTok for an hour, or opening Twitter the second they're not being spoken to, that person likely has an unhealthy usage habit with their device.

Teens in particular have an especially high vulnerability to cell phone addiction. Almost all of the current teen culture is created and spread online, and not being able to access it can make it very hard for them to feel capable of socializing properly with their peers. In addition to this, the pattern-seeking behaviors that smartphones prey upon to get people addicted are more active in teenagers, causing their addictions to smart devices to be even stronger and harder to avoid. If you're concerned with a teen's cell phone usage, an excellent first step is sitting them down and discussing what you've seen. Setting expectations for proper phone usage, and sticking to the same rules that you'd like to see them follow, helps teens to see that the concerns presented to them are serious and come from a place of caring.

Curbing cell phone addictions can be extremely difficult. Devices can feel as if they are required for our existence, and are designed in such a way that it becomes extremely easy to build bad habits around their use. Here are just a few methods to help decrease usage, and decrease reliance on smartphones.

- Track usage and use parental controls – For many, unlimited screen time is exactly what the name implies. For those who cannot put down their phone, but need to, using parental controls can be a great tool. Have a parent or a trusted friend set a password to the parental controls that you don't know. This way, when you run out of time, you'll have to give them a good reason to make them give you more time in the app, instead of being fully unmonitored.
- Disable Notifications – Push notifications are one of the largest contributors to FOMO. Even when not using the smart phone, notifications act as a constant reminder of what could be done on the phone. Disabling these prevents phones from drawing your attention with every message or update.
- Remove chargers from bedrooms – Sleep disruption from frequently checking phones can have serious effects on development for teens, and high functioning as adults. A great way to curb night usage is to make it impossible to charge the device at your bed. If someone needs to get up from their bed to check their device, they likely will simply go back to sleep.

For more information on smartphone addictions, check out the resources below.

<https://scipnebraska.com/resources/resources/digital-citizenship.html>

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/addictions/smartphone-addiction.htm>

<https://www.addictioncenter.com/drugs/phone-addiction/>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5076301/>

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ldLwkj4dRc&pp=ygUUc21hcnRwaG9uZSBhZGRpY3Rpb24%3D>

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/addictions/smartphone-addiction.htm>