

# Are You Addicted to Your Smartphone?

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › On average, people check their smartphones 150 times a day, or every six minutes, 46% say they couldn't live without them and many prefer texting over real-life conversations
- › Experts say that without time away from your phone, your nervous system stays in fight-or-flight mode, making you both wired and tired all the time
- › PBS' documentary "Web Junkie" reveals the screen addiction of youth in China who play video games around the clock without eating, sleeping or using the bathroom, and who see the real world as fake
- › Setting personal limits such as no phone use at mealtime and limiting posts on social media to a few times a week may help get your (real) life back, and be the example your kids need for setting healthy boundaries

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You've seen it many times – A family taking their seats in a restaurant, then one by one pulling out their individual smartphones to examine until the food comes, after which they check their phones repeatedly as they're eating.

Perhaps you've noticed people walking on busy streets, riding bicycles, driving cars or standing on a commuter train, scrolling their phones, paying little attention to their surroundings.

Toddlers, too, are given their own little digital devices, to which their eyes remain glued as if they're mesmerized instead of taking in the world around them and **engaging with real people** and real situations that help them grow socially and emotionally.

Most people in the real world have connected to technology, only vaguely aware that in the process there's the danger that unless they remain diligent, they'll disconnect to some degree from what's real and really important.

According to Nancy Colier, author of "The Power of Off," in The New York Times (NYT), "The only difference between digital addiction and other addictions is that this is a socially condoned behavior." The NYT observes:

*"The near-universal access to digital technology, starting at ever younger ages, is transforming modern society in ways that can have negative effects on physical and mental health, neurological development and personal relationships, not to mention safety on our roads and sidewalks."<sup>1</sup>*

## **Statistics Regarding Cellphone Use**

There's nothing like a good set of statistics to take a vague notion and attach the reality of numbers to it. In regard to cellphone use (or abuse) here are a few that may surprise you:

- Most people check their smartphones 150 times a day, or every six minutes.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 80% of teens check their phones hourly; 72% feel the urgent to respond immediately.<sup>3</sup>
- Cellphone users between 18 and 24 years exchange an average of 109.5 text messages per day, or more than 3,200 per month.<sup>4</sup>
- Forty-six percent of smartphone users say they "couldn't live without" it. Some say they'd give up sex first.<sup>5</sup>
- More than 1,000 pedestrians visited emergency rooms in 2008 following injuries while using a cellphone to talk or text, and since 2006, that number had doubled for

the previous two years, an Ohio State University study showed.<sup>6,7</sup> In 2010, pedestrians injured while using cellphones accounted for 1,500 emergency room visits.<sup>8</sup>

- Of the 83% of adults in the U.S. who own cellphones, about 73% of them send text messages; about 31% of that number prefers texting to actually talking on the phone.<sup>9</sup>

One author offered a reminder that every time people look down at their phones, they're spending precious time giving attention to something that doesn't really matter. It's about as mindless as someone doing a crossword puzzle while their daughter is giving a commencement speech. The NYT observed:

*"Moderation in our digital world should be the hallmark of a healthy relationship with technology.*

*Too many of us have become slaves to the devices that were supposed to free us, giving us more time to experience life and the people we love. Instead, we're constantly bombarded by bells, buzzers and chimes that alert us to messages we feel compelled to view and respond to immediately."<sup>10</sup>*

## **Now That We Have It, Who Wants to Live Without Technology?**

Over the last 40 years, give or take, the jobs of thousands of advertisers, journalists, secretaries, real estate brokers, students and arguably virtually every other profession has changed drastically with the great leap forward from typewriters to word processors.

Smartphones in today's world have much broader potential than just a way to get and take calls away from home.

Connected as they are to the internet, they can tell you how to cure a cold, how to plant a tree, the meaning of the word "zydeco" and directions to Milwaukee. They can also trigger emergency medical and weather alerts.

Whether you work at a desk, on an oil well drilling platform, on the deck of a shrimping boat or on a New York stage, phone technology has probably made your life easier and infinitely more entertaining. It's disengaging from them, however, that's proven to be the challenge, often with unforeseen drawbacks.

In a video from Business Insider,<sup>11</sup> Dr. Dan Siegel, clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Medicine, disclosed that smartphone use before bed has detrimental effects on both your brain and your body, literally releasing toxins to your cells.

Due to light exposure from screens (smartphone and otherwise), melatonin isn't released as usual to help you get to sleep, so you might figure, "Oh, well, I'm awake anyway," and turn to your phone again, worsening your **sleep deprivation**. Colier, also a licensed clinical social worker, notes:

*"Without open spaces and downtime, the nervous system never shuts down. It's in constant fight-or-flight mode. We're wired and tired all the time. Even computers reboot, but we're not doing it. It's connections to other human beings – real-life connections, not digital ones – that nourish us and make us feel like we count.*

*Our presence, our full attention is the most important thing we can give each other. Digital communications don't result in deeper connections, in feeling loved and supported."*<sup>12</sup>

## **Children and Technology – It's Up to You to Manage It**

According to The Kaiser Foundation,<sup>13</sup> two-thirds of parents had no rules about how much time their children spent with media, and the average 8- to 10-year-old spends nearly eight hours a day (teens up to 11 hours) with a variety of different media.

While many lament the lack of exercise for themselves and their children, and worry that there's "no time" to visit a (real) library, toss around a football in the park or enjoy a

sunset, they still scroll their phones. Almost by default, some parents opt out of those things for their kids, as well, because staying on the phone is just too easy.

PBS filmed a documentary, "Web Junkie," covering the tragic toll "screen addiction" is taking on young people in China, so obsessed with video games they play dozens of hours at a time, often without eating, sleeping or even using the bathroom. Immersed in the cyber world, they begin seeing the real world as the one that's counterfeit.

Chinese doctors treating it like a clinical disorder usually recommend rehabilitation centers where the young people immersed in the cyber culture are sometimes kept for months with a complete disconnect from all media, The NYT reported.<sup>14</sup>

While it may not have been given a clinical diagnosis, American teenagers and young adults are much more involved in games on their phones than experts think is healthy. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) wrote:

*"Children who overuse online media are at risk of problematic internet use, and heavy users of video games are at risk of internet gaming disorder."<sup>15</sup>*

Harried parents used to occupy their infants and toddlers with Sesame Street while they got ready for work. Today, just as many parents (or maybe more) hand their child a cellphone or tablet for their entertainment. They may not realize how harmful this might be for their children in the long run, as the skill to self-soothe.

Further, every hour spent playing on or otherwise engaged on cellphones is an hour spent sitting indoors. Detox expert Holland Haiis, author of "Consciously Connecting: A Simple Process to Reconnect in a Disconnected World," quoted by CNN, cautioned:

*"If your teens would prefer gaming indoors, alone, as opposed to going out to the movies, meeting friends for burgers or any of the other ways that teens build camaraderie, you may have a problem."<sup>16</sup>*

## **Experts' Phone Use Recommendations for Parents (and Their Children)**

The AAP has long stated that children should not be exposed to any electronic media before age 2. Why? Because "a child's brain develops rapidly during these first years, and young children learn best by interacting with people, not screens."<sup>17</sup>

They amended this to say that some high-quality media (such as educational TV) could provide educational value for children starting at 18 months, provided parents watch with their children to help them understand the content.<sup>18</sup>

The NYT further noted the AAP's recommendation that older children and teenagers be restricted to one or two hours a day on entertainment media – and no more – preferably with high-quality content. More importantly, they recommended kids spend more free time playing outdoors, reading and working on hobbies, and generally using their imaginations.

The question begs to be asked – What is considered "high-quality" content? Maybe focusing on what it's not is one way to find an answer to that. Kristina E. Hatch, in preparing her honors thesis at the University of Rhode Island, said she asked fourth-graders about their favorite video games.<sup>19</sup>

One kid said his favorite had "zombies in it, and you get to kill them with guns and there's violence ... I like blood and violence."<sup>20</sup> It doesn't take a rocket scientist to discern that a steady diet of this type of "entertainment" might not be good for kids of any age. Heavy electronic media use can have a significant and negative effect on not only kids' behavior, but school performance as well. Dr. Dimitri A. Christakis of the Seattle Children's Research Institute asserts:

*"Those who watch a lot of simulated violence, common in many popular video games, can become immune to it, more inclined to act violently themselves and less likely to behave empathetically."<sup>21</sup>*

In the first place, parents are the ones who usually purchase the different media options for their kids (or should be) but, for whatever reason, the same parents may be reluctant to offer guidelines or restrictions of any kind, even to the point of allowing them to play

in the car and during meals instead of engaging in conversation that leads to connection and relationship.

## Is It Possible to at Least Limit Your Smartphone Use?

One woman who decided to give up owning a smartphone entirely told The Guardian that before that point, she'd lived in a world where "constant communication isn't just a convenient accessory – it (was) a second skin." Then:

*"I got a landline and I got more sleep. I look people in the eye. I eat food instead of photographing it and am not driving half a ton of metal into oncoming traffic while looking down at a tiny screen."<sup>22</sup>*

Hais, the digital detox expert, says one way to resist spending more time than is useful is to try limiting posts to **social media** to two to three times a week. This not only forces you to give more thought to what you're posting; you spend less time looking at what others post.

Setting boundaries for yourself is key, Haiss maintains. When the urge comes to reach for your phone, for instance, go outside, take a walk or exercise – do something positive to distract yourself.

*"We have constant access to new information and this is alluring, intriguing and exciting, but without setting limits for yourself, it's a slippery slope ... The dopamine in our brains is stimulated by the unpredictability that social media, emails and texting provide.*

*It's a vicious cycle and in order to break that cycle, you need to find the same unpredictability and stimulation which is out there if you are exercising. You never know what's around the bend when out for a jog, bike ride or walk."<sup>23</sup>*

It's important to know when it's time to put down your smartphone and **connect with the living**, breathing people in your life, some whom you know and some whom you don't –

yet – but whom you'd never meet if you didn't look up. Colier offered a three-step plan<sup>24</sup> to help wean yourself from phone dependence:

- Figure out how much time you realistically need on your phone for things like work, navigation or letting people know you're OK, and how much you use it for pure entertainment and distraction.
- Rather than going off your phone cold turkey, determine times when you restrict your phone use and refuse to let it interrupt you, such as mealtime and spending time with family and friends.
- Determine what's really important to you, what "nourishes" you, and dedicate more thought, time and energy to those things. In short, live more intentionally and consciously, not dictated by the ringtone of your phone.

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