

On the phone AGAIN?

The majority of British adults spend around 16 hours a week surfing the net on smartphones. Caroline Roberts assesses the health impact of our screen habits

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Kate Sutton was sitting by the window scrolling through her Facebook feed one evening when someone posted a picture of a spectacular sunset. "I looked out and saw that there was indeed an amazing sunset and then carried on looking at it on my phone," she says. "The fact that I was so drawn to looking at it on a small screen rather than seeing it in real life is really quite depressing."

The 46-year-old arts event organiser is a self-confessed smartphone addict and she's certainly not alone in her screen fixation. Figures gathered this year by communications regulator Ofcom show that 78% of UK adults now own a smartphone and we spend almost two-thirds of our online time, which averages 24 hours a week, on the device. "Somehow you just get sucked in and keep scrolling," says Kate. "It's so difficult to put it down."

Hidden dangers

There's no doubt that growth in mobile technology has brought huge benefits. It can combat loneliness by helping us stay in contact with friends and family wherever we are. It allows us to keep up with the news, engage in debate and connect with people all over the world. We can access entertainment, find our way around, and track our fitness, nutrition and sleep patterns. However, conversely, it can mean we replace real intimacy with hundreds of virtual 'friends', it can suck us into negative online exchanges, and it can rob us of the time we might otherwise spend taking exercise or enjoying hobbies.

There's also the effect on physical wellbeing. Studies have found that the light emitted by screens interferes with production of the sleep hormone melatonin, so using your phone just before bed can cause insomnia and poor sleep quality. Smartphones are also a threat to road safety. A 2016 report from the RAC found that almost a third of motorists admit to using a handheld phone to make or receive calls while driving, and a fifth think it's fine to text or check social media while in stationary traffic, despite this being illegal.

Of course, the problem lies in how we use mobile technology rather than the technology itself. But why does it exert so much power over us? Hilda Burke, a psychotherapist and author of a book on smartphone addiction, explains that it's similar to any other addiction or compulsive behaviour in that the constant messages, notifications and 'likes' of our social media posts activate the reward circuits in the brain, giving us a hit of the feel-good chemical dopamine.

"The kind of content we access on our smartphones is very 'sticky'," she adds. "Developers are being paid huge amounts of money to come up with ways to keep us engaged. Social media refreshes all the time so there's another bunch of posts, tweets or pictures, and it feeds our FOMO [fear of missing out] – something might just happen in the world without us knowing. It can be quite hard to disengage from that cycle."

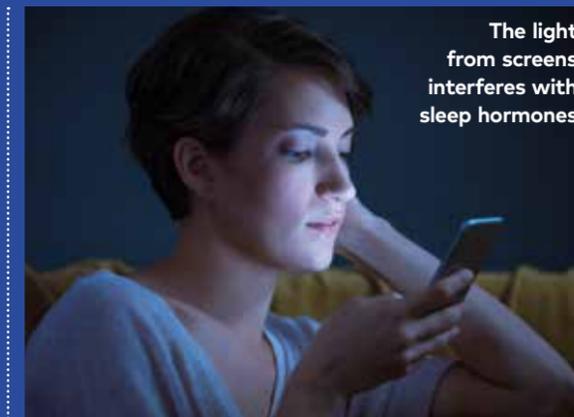
Breaking bonds

Too much screen time costs when it comes to personal relationships, says clinical psychologist Abigail San. "Most people don't come to see me specifically about issues with their phone, but it's something that comes up frequently when we talk about

HOW TO CUT BACK SCREEN TIME

Do you feel bereft if you find you've left your phone at home, panicky when you have a low battery or no signal, keep breaking off an activity to check your phone? If it's interfering with the rest of your life, then it's time to take action, says psychotherapist Hilda Burke. Here, she offers some tips to help you get your addiction under control.

- Use an app to measure your time on your phone. This can be quite sobering. The latest iPhone has the built-in Screen Time app to do this, and there are many others for both Android and iOS that do everything from limiting your time on social media to blocking your phone completely at specified times.
- A full digital detox can be beneficial, but isn't practical for most



The light from screens interferes with sleep hormones

people, so set some times that are phone free, such as family mealtimes or while watching television

- Turn off automatic notifications. These noises are like the alarms that wake us up and alert us to danger, so we're primed to pay attention to them.
- Turn off your phone and put it away in social situations. It's all too easy to get it out while your friend pops to the loo and

by the time they get back you'll have been sucked in.

- Get an alarm clock so you're not woken up by your phone in the morning, and don't turn it on as soon as you get up. Wear a watch rather than getting your phone out every time you need to check the time.

The Phone Addiction Workbook by Hilda Burke will be available on Amazon from June 2019.



relationship dynamics. Often one half of a couple is feeling less important than whatever their partner is doing on their phone. It could be that they're giving a foot massage, but the other person is scrolling through Facebook rather than showing appreciation. I also hear about people checking their phone when they've just finished having sex or even responding to an alert right in the middle of the act."

There's also a clear link between social media and mental wellbeing, she adds, with too much exposure to the perfect lives, bodies and homes of others having a negative impact on our self-esteem. "People define themselves by what they post, so of course they're broadcasting all the positive things. It's a skewed and unrealistic picture of what's really happening in people's lives, and encourages us to spend too much time comparing ourselves with others."

For Kate, it's more about the effect on her anxiety levels. "A few months ago I made a conscious decision to stop looking at certain things on social media. There are so many posts about shocking things going on in the world and I just felt bombarded. I found I was worrying about lots of things I could do nothing about."

For people who experience social anxiety, a phone can act as a comfort blanket, says Abigail. "If you're in a social situation where you feel uncomfortable, such as at a party where you don't know anyone, you might start looking at your phone. However, this means you look inaccessible and distracted, so people are less likely to come and talk to you and you end up feeling more isolated. It can make us emotionally avoidant as there's always that distraction there so we're missing our own natural alarm bells and opportunities to grow, reflect and experience the world and our feelings."

Concentration killer

Some people have gone so far as to say that mobile technology is rewiring our brains, decreasing our concentration spans and destroying our ability to think for ourselves. While there's no firm scientific evidence that our love of smartphones is permanently changing the way our brains function – this would require neuroimaging studies carried out over a long period

Screen time can have a negative impact on family dynamics and spending quality time together

We're not helpless in the face of all these alluring apps

– it's clear they're often a major distraction from the task in hand. "There's often something you need to look up," says Kate, "and you start off with something that's vaguely relevant to the information you need. Then one thing leads to another and, before you know it, you're on YouTube watching a dog skateboarding."

However, there is some suggestion of an effect on memory and cognitive abilities, with research finding we learn and remember less when we access information

via a smartphone. This is a worry as we're constantly being told to 'use it or lose it' to help ward off cognitive decline as we age. "You're out for dinner with a friend and can't remember the name of someone in that film," says Abigail. "How long does it take before one of you reaches for your phone to look it up? We're losing the capacity to search our own memories for information. If you resist the urge to check, you'll find you can remember things, but phones are making us lazy and impatient."

Hilda adds: "Unlike alcohol or drugs, smartphone addiction is socially acceptable and people feel comfortable owning up to it. The problem is this normalises it. But we do have willpower and we can exercise this. We're not helpless in the face of all these alluring apps and platforms. Most of us are time-poor, but if we spent an hour less on our phones, it would free up some time to do the things we really value and make us feel good about ourselves, such as investing in our relationships, doing some exercise or a creative hobby. I started by making my dog walk a sacred, phone-free time. Once you get a taste of that liberation, you want more of it."

*Kate Sutton is a pseudonym

COULD I GO PHONE FREE?

Be Healthy editor Siân gives it a go



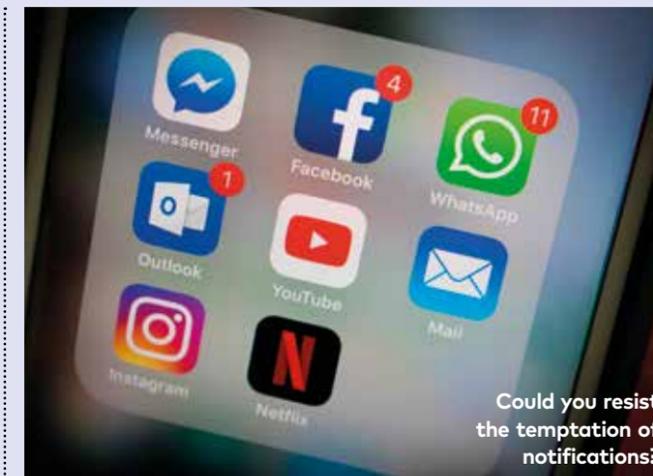
Working as a journalist, it's almost unimaginable for me to go mobile-free for a week – how will I know the latest on Brexit or indeed who has been voted off my favourite reality TV show? Also, I have to know what is happening with the articles I'm working on – updates come at any time of the day or night.

I decide to compromise and to switch off my phone and laptop from 5.30pm to 9.30am the next day. (I don't own a tablet, so can't cheat with that.) Here's how I got on.

Monday

I switch off my phone at 5.30pm and immediately realise I need to turn it back on. This evening I have two people picking up Freecycle items I'm giving away, but I can't remember when. As soon as my home screen lights up, I spot an email from my eldest daughter's school about an inspection the next day. I quickly check the parents' WhatsApp group in case anyone knows more about this and then make a note of who is coming over to collect tonight and the times.

An hour later and one of the collectors hasn't turned up and I'm itching to know why... so I turn my phone back on to see a message saying that they'll be by in the morning. Then I notice I have some LinkedIn requests so nose my way over to the app. I turn my phone off at 7.30pm and manage to go all



Could you resist the temptation of notifications?

night without checking again. (I read on my Kindle though – is that cheating?)

Tuesday

I watch the clock tick down to 9.30am like I'm waiting for a fix. As soon as my phone lights up, there are endless notifications on the various social media and email accounts I subscribe to. It takes about an hour scrolling through these before I even start work. Oops. At 5.15pm, I remember to check any messages and text my mum telling her to call my partner if anything urgent comes up.

I switch off and relax. I read to my younger daughter at bedtime without being

distracted by every message ping. I miss attempting the newspaper crossword on my phone later that evening and instead spend time putting a real-life photo album together while watching my partner and our 15-year-old daughter spend their evening staring silently at their phones.

Wednesday

Rather than checking my phone for 10 (or, truthfully, 20) minutes before rolling out of bed to start the day, I leap into the shower and find I have a much less stressed morning of breakfast and making packed lunches because I haven't eaten up my limited morning minutes

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reading the online news or checking Twitter. I have noticed my energy levels are higher – possibly because I'm not checking my phone in bed last thing...

Thursday

The new regime is having a mostly positive impact on my mornings, but when I switch on my phone at 10am this morning, I find I have missed a last-minute invitation to have a quick coffee with some other mums in the neighbourhood after school drop-off. I've heard my teenager mention FOMO (fear of missing out) and I realise that this is what I'm experiencing. The better news is I have an urge to go out for a run this evening after my youngest has gone to sleep. Usually, I'm exhausted and just want to slump and watch something on TV or scroll through social media. I run for about 20 minutes and feel a bit smug afterwards.

Friday

While each day's getting easier, today I decide to end the experiment because I have a small epiphany when I realise that if I turn off notifications for work emails and other social media, I can avoid being drawn towards every minor update. If it's urgent, they'll call, I rationalise. So – with the exception of texts – I make the decision to try to use my phone just for calls and keep all the other stuff for when I have time to deal with it. (I realise that this makes me sound a bit like a heavy drinker who says they're giving up spirits – but, hey, I'm doing my best.) So, once I've looked up a carrot cake recipe to make with my youngest, I am determined to put my phone down for the evening...