

## **Disconnect to Savor More**

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Cellular phones have come a long way since the 1980's when they were primarily used for making wireless phone calls (Ray, 2015). The smartphones of today literally place the internet into the palm of the user's hand. This ability to connect can be a wonderful resource, but it can also create some challenges that reach far beyond simply consuming valuable time. What makes this issue so worthy of our attention is the fact that it affects 3.8 billion users, ranging from pre-teens to adults (statista.com). Of these users, a specific demographic makes up the majority. According to a 2013 study by researchers in Korea, more than 77% of smartphone users are 20 -39 years of age. Particularly at the lower end of this age spectrum are people who must learn how to manage behaviors while they are younger, in order to create habits that will maintain future health (Lee, et al). One of the challenges of this problem is bringing awareness of the negative effects created by the overuse of smartphones. The other issue lies in creating a palatable solution for managing a problem many either do not realize they have, or simply do not want to resolve. The purpose of this proposal is to shed light on how smartphones are affecting the mental and physical health of college-age users, as well as to offer suggestions for creating effective strategies for maintaining a healthy balance between using smartphones and managing personal time.

According to Dr. Adam Alter, a best-selling author and professor of marketing at New York University, smartphone use has steadily taken over the way we spend our personal time (2017). In his TED Talk "Why Our Screens Make Us Less Happy" Dr. Alter explains that during

the average 24-hour workday, 20 of those hours are spent sleeping, working and engaging in “survival activities” like eating and bathing. This leaves us just 4 hours of personal time per day. Dr. Alter explains that personal time is very important to us because it encompasses the time we spend doing things that make our lives feel meaningful: such as maintaining relationships, spending time with friends, and engaging in hobbies. If we were to view any given day as a pie chart, the small slice devoted to personal time becomes even smaller due to the amount we spend on our smartphones. Not only has smartphone time increased, we are spending three times as much of our attention on the applications that reportedly bring less joy to our lives. Why would we devote so much time to something that fails to deliver happiness? Dr. Alter cites a lack of “stopping cues” which signal a natural end point to an activity, such as finishing a chapter of a book, or the credits rolling at the end of a movie. Most people can relate to this notion. Have you ever caught yourself ‘checking Facebook for just a minute’ but before you know it, a half hour has passed? It can be very easy to lose track of time without stopping cues to signal it is time to move on to another activity.

This brings us to another detriment of smartphones: they create addiction. That notification icon on Facebook can be very enticing. According to *Psychology Today* contributing author Dr. Loretta Breuning, when we see that icon light up, it triggers the release of the “feel good” chemicals oxytocin and dopamine in the brain. These are the same chemicals triggered by addiction to drugs or alcohol. When an experience makes us happy, we want to repeat it again and again. The combination of the excitement derived from receiving ‘likes’ on Facebook or ‘hearts’ on Instagram, with the lack of stopping cues that allow us to scroll and scroll and scroll—makes it very easy to perpetuate an addiction without realizing we are in fact addicted.

Furthermore, research conducted by Dr. Kyung Eun Lee, which surveyed over 1200 university students in Korea, shows that smartphone dependency is associated with increased anxiety (Lee, et al, 2016). This research further shows that women were slightly more adversely affected than men and also showed that the higher participants scored on a dependency scale, the more their anxiety increased.

Smartphones are very portable. Most of us carry them in a pocket or purse, making them very accessible. This convenient access makes it that much easier to give into the temptation to use them, oftentimes for what we intend to be a short period of time. It may seem harmless to check our favorite team's score during dinner or tap the notification icon at a stoplight while driving, but the increase in dopamine and oxytocin can easily turn an intended few seconds into more time than we intended to spend. We temporarily lose the ability to be mindful of the moment, making it all too easy to miss out on meaningful dialogue over dinner with family, active listening with a friend over coffee, not realizing the stoplight has turned green and holding up everyone behind you.

In order to see how smartphones are affecting the people I know personally, I asked 35 of my friends and family to complete a survey of eleven questions regarding their smartphone usage and behaviors. The respondents ranged in age from 21 to 58. I began with questions related to how each person uses his or her smartphone. The largest number of respondents (46%) reported they primarily use their smartphone for communication purposes like talking and texting, while 42% reported that even though they use their smartphone for everything from communication to entertainment, they feel they do a good job with balancing their usage. In spite of this noble report, over 80% also admitted their smartphone is a distraction from focusing on things they should be doing instead; and over 90% responded that they use their cell phone to

prevent feeling bored, for example by pulling out their phones while waiting in a line. Only 29% of those surveyed reported they do not look at their phones while driving. Of the remaining 71% who admitted using their phones while driving, 61% report they take calls via Bluetooth without looking at their phones, or felt they only look at their phones at stoplights for a few seconds. The remaining 10% admit they look at their phones while driving, but do not believe it inhibits their ability to drive safely. One of the most interesting and possibly most revealing answers on the survey is that 93% of respondents confirm they keep their phones on even while they are sleeping. The answers to this portion of the survey leads me to believe that while most respondents probably have the best of intentions, they may not realize how distracting and time-consuming their smartphones have become.

For the second part of the survey I asked my respondents three questions related to changing their smartphone habits. The first question asked whether they would be willing to reduce their smartphone time if they were shown proof that overuse is detrimental to their physical and mental health. The second question offered multiple choice options for ways to disconnect temporarily, and the final question in this section asked how long they believe they would be able to go without using social media applications like Facebook and Instagram. Nearly 90% replied that they would be willing to reduce their smartphone usage if they learned it was harmful to their mental and physical health. Interestingly, the amount of time they felt they could realistically go without connecting to social media ranged from 32% saying they could go a week or two, 45% answering only one to two days, 3% felt they could last 8-10 hours, 16% responding they could only manage going without for an hour or two, and one very honest soul admitted he or she simply would not be able to go without connecting to social media. The most popular strategy chosen for altering smartphone usage (64%) involved adding a healthy behavior

to the mix: matching the amount of time spent online with equal time exercising. The second most popular strategy selected by 42% of respondents was the option of turning off their phones during mealtimes. Interestingly, one of these proposed changes creates better physical health and one potentially improves emotional connection by making room for more conversation with family or friends during meals. The latter suggestion is one also offered by Adam Alter in his Ted Talk when he points out that it is easier to successfully disconnect at a time you already devote to a certain activity, such as eating dinner, rather than choosing a specific hour of the day (2017).

There are many things we can do to create a better balance of our personal time with regard to lessening dependence on smartphones and screens. It will be difficult at first because as with any addiction, the withdrawal period is very uncomfortable. Little by little though, achieving a goal becomes very satisfying. Sticking to a plan to disconnect creates space for satisfying new experiences and deeper connections to take place. These types of experiences also trigger the feel-good chemicals in the brain, causing us to crave more of the same. Why not use your brain chemistry in positive ways that fill your life with more satisfying experiences? I challenge you to try one of the strategies proposed in my survey: instead of scrolling through what's happening to other people on Facebook, turn off your phone during meals for one week and savor everything from conversation to good food. Dare to expand your own experiences instead of looking in on someone else's. To quote Steve Jobs, former CEO of Apple, "Time is limited. Don't waste it living someone else's life."

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