

Are Phones Making Us Zombies?

Experts say too much screen time is causing us harm.
Here's what you can do about it.

By Mackenzie Carro



As You Read How do our smartphones affect our lives?

Your mom is driving you to your grandma's house when suddenly your stomach drops. You frantically pat your pockets. It's not there. You rummage through your backpack. It's not there either. You search under the car seats and between the cushions.

And then—with horror—you realize what you did: You left your phone at home.

Panic sets in. All those unanswered texts, the unopened snaps, the unaccepted *Fortnite* invitations! You know it's not the end of the world, but you can't help getting a bit twitchy and restless. You actually *feel* your phone vibrating in your pocket, even though it isn't there.

What is happening to you? In fact, what you are experiencing are symptoms of a growing problem in America today: smartphone addiction.

Smartphone addiction is the **compulsion** to constantly check and interact with your phone. Although phone addiction isn't

officially recognized as a medical condition like drug or alcohol addiction, experts do believe it is a serious problem that **wreaks havoc** on our bodies and minds—making us distracted, tired, anxious, and unhappy.

And kids like you are most at risk. According to a 2016 Common Sense Media survey, 50 percent of kids and teens feel addicted to their mobile devices.

Can we fix this?

The Problem

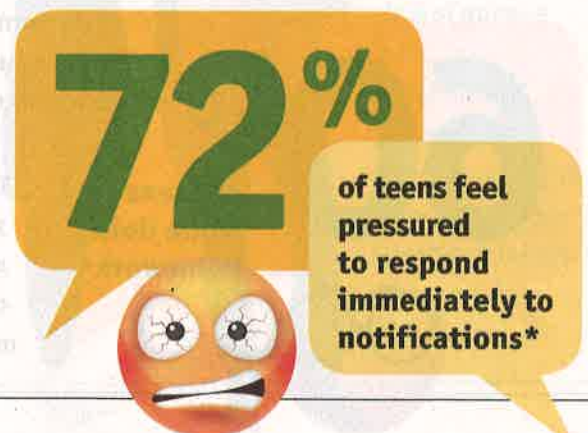
Throughout human history, few inventions have transformed our lives as profoundly as the smartphone. Since the iPhone debuted in 2007, smartphones have found their way into every part of our lives. Our phones wake us up in the morning. They give us directions, keep us informed, and connect us with friends and family 24-7. They allow us to buy movie tickets, pay our bills, and listen to Ed Sheeran's latest hit whenever we want—wherever we are.

But as amazing as smartphones are, they have a dark side. Addiction is a condition in which a person repeatedly engages in the use of a substance (such as alcohol) or in a behavior (such as

gambling) despite the negative consequences of doing so. Someone who is addicted to something finds it incredibly hard to resist that thing, even if he or she wants to.

Phone addiction works like this: When you feel pleasure—like when you watch Steph Curry sink a winning dunk or when you take a bite of gooey chocolate cake, for example—your brain releases a chemical called dopamine. This same chemical is released when you interact with your phone and get something rewarding out of it, such as a like on Instagram or a text from a friend. Your brain likes this rush of dopamine and wants to re-create it again and again, so you check your phone again and again.

Over time, the association your brain makes between your smartphone and good feelings can become so strong that those buzzes and dings become impossible to resist. Even if you *want* to ignore your phone, your brain insists, "Come on—just take a peek!" →



*Statistic: Common Sense Media

Warning Signs

For you, the risk of developing this kind of obsessive relationship with your phone is higher than it is for an adult because your brain is still developing. The parts of your brain that control pleasure and emotion are more developed than the parts that control logic and reasoning. This affects your decision-making and makes you more **vulnerable** to the addictive aspects of smartphones.

For example, you might understand that checking your phone while doing your math homework isn't a good idea. But because your brain is hyper-focused on seeking out pleasurable experiences, the **lure** of your device can overpower everything else. So instead of putting your phone away while you're studying, you continue to check it every few minutes. Suddenly, four hours have passed and you've worked through only two math problems out of 20.

When the need to constantly check your phone begins to interfere with your life in this way,

it may mean the obsession has gone too far. Warning signs of addiction include lying about how much time you're spending on your devices, spending less time in-person with friends, and seeing your grades fall, says psychologist Edward Spector, who helps teens who obsessively use technology.

State of Concentration

Nearly half of teens report being online "almost constantly," according to a Pew Research Center study. Indeed, when kids are studying, they tend to be interrupted by their phones every three to five minutes, says Larry Rosen, a psychologist who researches teens' relationship with technology.

Why is that a bad thing?

It takes your brain about 23 minutes to achieve the state of concentration you need to write an essay or read a novel. Each time you check your phone (or hear it buzz or spot an alert out of the corner of your eye), your brain is pulled out of its state of concentration.

When you go back to reading or writing, your brain has to start all over. So constantly checking your phone means not only that you

72%

of teens sleep with their phones nearby*



may never reach the level of deep thought you're capable of, but also that it will take you longer to get things done.

Distraction can happen even when your phone isn't near you, like on that trip to Grandma's house. All those anxious thoughts about everything you're missing out on—the posts, the likes, the snaps—can be just as distracting as your phone itself.

So Sleepy

Your ability to concentrate isn't the only thing that's suffering, either. Your health may be too. Teens need about nine hours of sleep each night to stay healthy. According to a study conducted by psychologist Jean Twenge, 43 percent of teens are getting fewer than seven hours. Many experts, including Twenge herself, are certain that smartphones are a big factor in this sleep **deprivation**.

How do phones affect sleep?

The light your phone emits tells your brain that it's daytime and you should be awake. Your brain stops producing the chemicals that help you get sleepy. That's why you may have trouble falling asleep if you're on your phone

right before bedtime. As a result of getting too little sleep, you may experience moodiness, anxiety, and depression. You may also find it hard to pay attention and remember what you learn at school.

App Makers

For some in the tech industry, smartphone addiction is not so much a problem as it is an opportunity. In fact, app makers *want* you to get hooked on their products.

Why?

The more time you spend on an app, the more money the company can get from advertisers that pay to display their ads.

Setting Limits

Parents, psychologists, and teachers have been voicing concerns about smartphones for some time. But now, even leaders in the tech industry admit that their products can be harmful when used excessively. In fact, many of these leaders restrict their

own kids' screen time.

Roy Sehgal, chief operating officer of the image-sharing site Imgur, doesn't allow his children to use their devices at meals, in their bedrooms, or before their homework is done. Danielle Levitas, senior vice

president of App Annie, allows screen time only on the weekends. Even the late Steve Jobs, the creator of the iPhone, set strict screen limits for his kids.

Phone-Free Time

What can you do?

First, says Rosen, stop using your phone at least an hour before you go to bed at night. Second, turn off your notifications to decrease the temptation to pick up your phone.

Rosen also recommends taking technology breaks. That could mean leaving your phone at home sometimes or turning it off for a certain amount of time each day. Use your phone-free time to pick up a new hobby, explore nature, meditate, listen to music, or simply have a conversation with someone. As a fun challenge, you and your friends can try taking breaks

together. Next time you have a sleepover, implement a "no phones" rule.

As time goes on, you'll find that you can take longer breaks without fear of missing out.

Who knows?

One day you may even *choose* to make that trip to Grandma's house without your phone. ●

5 Ways to Beat Smartphone Addiction

- 1 Move your social media apps to the last screen on your phone so you don't see them on your home screen.
- 2 Put your phone in another room while you sleep so you can't reach over and check it during the night.
- 3 Don't carry your phone in your pocket. Instead, when you're walking around, put your phone in your bag, where it's harder to get to.
- 4 Take a break from your phone while studying. You can reward yourself with phone time when you're done.
- 5 Use a tracking app to find out how much time you're spending on your phone. Then set limits for yourself.



60%

of teens text while doing homework*



*Statistics: National Sleep Foundation (top), Common Sense Media (bottom)



Should Your Parents Control Your Phone?

New tools from Apple will let your parents control how much time you spend on your phone. Could this be the best thing that ever happened to you? **By Mackenzie Carro**

Apple has been developing a new iPhone feature called Screen Time. Unlike most Apple products, Screen Time has nothing to do with enhancing your experience on your phone. Rather, Screen Time is meant to get you off your phone.

Each day, Screen Time tracks the number of notifications you get, how many times you pick up your phone, and how much time you spend on each app. (Four hours on YouTube? Oops.) Screen Time also lets you set app limits. For example, you can set an app limit of 15 minutes a day for Instagram. If you stay

on Instagram longer than that, you'll get a notification warning you that you've gone over your limit.

Screen Time also enables parents to set app limits for their kids—and these cannot be ignored. In other words, if you go over an Instagram limit set by your mom, you'll be locked out of the app until the next day—or until your mom decides to let you back on.

Screen Time is certainly not the first app to enlist parents to help tackle the problem of excessive screen time. Last year, Google released a similar feature called Digital Wellbeing. Other screen-time tracking apps, like Moment, have been available for some time.

But can these kinds of apps really solve the problem of too much screen time?

A Huge Success

Supporters of Screen Time and similar apps say that by enabling parents to better help their kids manage their phone time, these apps can help kids be healthier and more productive.

This was the case for Joshua, 14, from Bromley, England. Earlier this year, Joshua started to worry that he was spending too much time on his phone. His mom suggested that he use an app that would allow her to block him from using his phone at certain times of the day, such as while doing homework and at bedtime.

Joshua agreed—and it's been life-changing.

"I'm way more productive now," says Joshua. "It's training me to use my time more positively."

But not everyone thinks apps like Screen Time are the right solution to smartphone addiction. Some people argue that learning to manage your time is an important part of growing up. If kids start to rely on their parents or an app to manage their screen time for them, what are they really learning?

What's more, if your dad turns off Instagram for you from the next room without explaining why,

will that decrease your desire to go on Instagram? Parent-operated controls could lead to frustration and arguments, and at the end of the day, they might not make you any less addicted to your phone.

For any real change in behavior to take place, family members need to be on the same page, says Dr. Frances Jensen, chair of neurology at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *The Teenage Brain*. Instead of just having a parent set limits for you, have a conversation about what limits are appropriate.

For example, if your Screen Time data shows you are spending a lot of time on YouTube, talk with your parents about how you're using the app. If you're making your own videos and sharing them with your friends in the afternoon, your parents may decide that the amount of time you're spending is OK; you're doing something creative and learning valuable skills. But if you're watching mindless videos in the middle of the night, you and your parents will probably agree that's not healthy. If used in this way, Screen Time could be a helpful tool, Jensen believes.

The Wrong Problem?

On the other hand, should we really be turning to a piece of technology to help solve a problem that's caused by . . . technology?

"I think that relying on an app to limit the time I spend on my phone is counterintuitive," says Xavier, 16, from College Park, Georgia, who has never used an app for managing screen time. "The goal is to be less dependent on your phone."

What's more, some believe tools like Screen Time are focused on the wrong problem entirely. Perhaps instead of creating apps that help users who are already addicted, technology innovators should work on making their apps less addictive to begin with.

Until that happens though, Screen Time is a step in the right direction. ●

Writing Contest

Make a public service announcement (PSA) about the dangers of smartphone addiction and how kids can have a healthy relationship with their devices. Your PSA can be a short video, a poster, or a slideshow. Send it to [Phone Contest](#). Five winners will get *You Go First* by Erin Entrada Kelly.

Get this activity online.