

Think Clearer

Dealing with smartphone addiction

Whilst we commonly associate addiction with drugs and alcohol, there are a growing number of addictions related to behaviours that don't involve substances but they still have a powerful impact on our brain chemistry and ultimately our lives. One such and rapidly emerging addiction relates to use of digital technology and particularly our Smartphones.

Are you fully aware of all of the impacts of heavy usage?



There is a very strong possibility that you are a heavy Smartphone user, and you can justify your phone use because you compose emails, read the newspaper, and listen to podcasts, as well indulge in the inevitable social media scrolling. Could you be addicted?

Crossing the line

So, is there a line? When does phone use go from being functional, a tool that aids your busy lifestyle, to something that is damaging and potentially harmful? The answer to that question is yes, there is a line. Phone addiction can lead to a range of 'symptoms' including:

- Sleep disturbance
- Anxiety and other Mental Health issues
- Poor concentration and reduced ability to focus
- Insecurity
- Loneliness and isolation

Chronic phone use can lead to a change in brain activity by rewiring the circuitry involved in pleasure and rewards. Recent research has shown that phone addiction can lead to structural changes within the brain that resemble the brains of those with drug addictions.

How do I know if I'm addicted to my phone?

Do you find yourself:

- Almost continually reaching for your phone
- Experiencing strong feelings of anger or tension when looking at social media
- Feeling anxious if your phone is not within reaching distance
- Lying about your phone use
- Neglecting work or other duties
- Having to check your phone in order to reduce internal tension and anxiety
- Getting angry or irritated if you are interrupted while on your phone

This list is not exhaustive, but an accumulation of these types of patterns would suggest that there may be a problem with your phone use.

Breaking the cycle

Before seeking professional help, there are a variety of steps you can take to bring your phone back under conscious control and reduce the harmful effects it could be having on your life.

The first step would be to acknowledge that there may be a problem and you would like to make a change. From here, you could opt to take a 30-day period where you are going to stick with some changes or modifications to your phone use.

Try these possible steps:

- Going cold turkey with your phone is probably not realistic and could create an entirely different set of problems. However, reduced use is a great place to start. Find your baseline level of use, what is the minimum amount of time you absolutely need for your phone.
- Gradually reduce your phone use, targeting 1-4 hours where your phone is put to one side. This is normally easier during the evenings or when you are not working. Try putting your phone in a different room.
- Pick a day at the weekend where you can be entirely phone free. While this may initially lead to a sense of agitation or tension, you will most likely notice this subside and give way to a greater sense of peace and freedom
- Turn off all notifications so you're not distracted
- Remove all social media from your phone and all apps that are not absolutely essential
- While at work, put your phone in 'focus' mode or airplane mode
- Develop a mindfulness practice so you can nurture your 'here and now' brain chemicals and reduce your dependence on future focused brain chemicals.
- If these don't work, there is professional support you can seek.

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People are becoming prisoners of their smartphones. That's why they called Cell Phones!