

Addicted to Your Smartphone?

Here's What to Do. Why smartphones hook us in, plus tips on reclaiming your time and concentration

By Susan Davis

- 1 I'll admit it I check my smartphone compulsively. And the more I use it, the more often I have to look at it. I'm not
- 2 in the neuroscientist's office. Waking my kids to school. In meetings. Even while making breakfast. Sometimes it is in my hand before I even know what I'm searching for. Sometimes I tap the screen absentmindedly—looking at my e-mail, a local blogger, my calendar, and Twitter.
- 3 I'm not the only one struggling with the very modern compulsion. According to a 2012 survey by the Pew Research Center, 48% of all American adults now own a smartphone—up a whopping 25% from 2011.
- 4 And smartphone use can get very heavy. In a study of 1,600 managers and professionals, Linda Perlow, PhD, the Kenneth A. Martin professor of leadership at the Harvard Business School, found that:
 - 70% said they check their smartphone within an hour of getting up.
 - 56% check their phone within an hour of going to sleep.
 - 48% check over the weekend, including on Friday and Saturday nights.
 - 51% check continuously during vacation.
 - 44% said they would experience "a great deal of anxiety" if they lost their phone and couldn't replace it for a week.
- 5 "The amount of time that people are spending with the new technology, the apparent preoccupation, raises the question 'why?'" says Peter Delmonico, academic chair of the Information Technology leadership program at Santa Clara University in California. "When you start seeing that people have to look when they're driving, even though they clearly know that they're endangering their lives and the lives of others, we really have to ask what is so compelling about this new medium?"



- 6 **Hook or Habit?**
 - Whether smartphones really "hook" users into dependency remains unclear.
- 7 But "we already know that the Internet and certain forms of computer use are addictive," says David Greenfield, PhD, at West Virginia. Carr, psychologist and author of *Virtual Addiction: How for Facebook, Cyber Flirts, and Those Other Low Lines*. Then:
 - "And while we're not seeing actual smartphone addiction now," Greenfield says, "the potential is certainly there."
- 8 A true addiction entails a growing tolerance to a substance (think drugs or alcohol) or you need more to get "high," uncomfortable symptoms during withdrawal, and a harmful impact on your life, Greenfield says.
- 9 Computer technologies can be addictive, he says, because they're "hyper-rewarding." That is, they offer instant and often bigger dopamine hitings.
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- 11 E-mail, in particular, gives us satisfaction due to what psychologists call "variable ratio reinforcement." That is, we never know when we'll get a satisfying e-mail, so we keep checking, over and over again. "It's like slot machines," Greenfield says. "We're seeking that predictable hit."
- 12 Smartphones, of course, allow us to seek rewards (including videos, Twitter feeds, and news updates, in addition to e-mail anytime and anywhere. Is such behavior unhealthy?)
- 13 "That really depends on whether it's disrupting your work or family life," Greenfield says.
- 14 Such a disruption could be small—like ignoring your friend over lunch to post a Facebook status about how much you're enjoying lunch with your friend.
- 15 Or it could be big—like turning out a distressed spouse or colleague in a meeting to check e-mail, or losing knowledge connected by the fact that someone else seems to be on call 24/7, so perhaps we should be, too.
- 16 Other researchers are seeing clear signs of **dysfunction**, if not an "addiction."
- 17 According to a 2011 study published in the journal *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, people aren't addicted to smartphones themselves as much as they are addicted to "checking habits" that develop with phone use—including repeatedly and/or compulsively checking for news updates, e-mails, or social media connections.
- 18 That study found that certain environmental triggers—like being bored or listening to a lecture—trigger the habits. And while the average user checks his or her smartphone 25 times a day for about 20 seconds each time, when the information rewards are greater (e.g., having contact info linked to the contact's whereabouts), users check even more often.

The Interrupted Life

- 19 Besides creating a compulsion, smartphones pose other dangers to our mental life, says Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*.
- 20 "The smartphone, through its small size, ease of use, portability of free or cheap apps, and constant connectivity, changes our relationship with computers in a way that goes well beyond what we experienced with laptops," he says. That's because people keep their smartphones near them. "You're constantly taking value up until the moment they go to bed," and throughout that time the device provides an almost continuous stream of messages and alerts as well as easy access to a myriad of compelling information sources.
- 21 "By design," he says, "it's an environment of almost constant interruptions and distractions. The smartphones, more than any other gadget, steals from us the opportunity to maintain our attention, to engage in contemplation and reflection, or even to be alone with our thoughts."
- 22 Carr also writes extensively in *The Shallows* about the way that computer technology in general may be **detracting** our ability to concentrate and think deeply, cited not from a smartphone.
- 23 "One thing my research made clear is that human beings have a deep, primitive desire to know everything that's going on around them," he says.
- 24 "That instinct probably helped us survive when we were hunter and gatherers. I'm sure one of the main reasons people tend to be so **compulsive** in their use of smartphones is that they can't stand the idea that there may be a new bit of information out there that they haven't seen. I know that I'm not alone enough to resist that temptation, so I've decided to shut off the device altogether."

Managing Your Smartphone Use

- 25 Can "give up your phone altogether? Experts suggest these steps to control your usage:
 - **Be courteous** of the situations and emotions that make you want to check your phone. Is it **fundamentally** **unavoidable**? **Unavoidable** means something else would soothe you.
 - **Be strong** when your phone beeps or rings. You don't always have to answer it. In fact, you can avoid temptation by turning off the alert signals.
 - **Be disciplined** about not using your device in certain situations such as when you're with children, driving, or in a meeting or at work. hours for instance, between 9 a.m. and 7 p.m. "You'll be surprised and pleased to rediscover the pleasure of being in control of your attention," Carr says.
- 26 One group of business people at The Boston Group, a consulting firm, discovered just that when they participated in an experiment run by Perlow.
- 27 As described in her book, *Smiling with Your Smartphone*, the group found that taking regular "predictable time off (PTO)" from their iPads resulted in increased efficiency and productivity, heightened job satisfaction, and better work-life balance.
- 28 They make other for field experiment: Before noon, 80% of the consulting staff in the firm's Northeast offices—including Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C.—were on leave engaged in virtual PTO experiments.
- 29 To manage my own smartphone well, more smartly, I **wisely** **reined** **away** from it.
- 30 I started by not checking it for 15 minutes at a time, then 30, then 60 (times I was dealing with an urgent situation).
- 31 I decided to avoid using the web browser on the smartphone unless I truly needed information (such as an address or phone number).
- 32 And I turned off using social media on Twitter. I later made a firm commitment to not text, e-mail, or surf the web on my smartphone while driving.
- 33 The result? Even after a few days of this self-discipline, I found that I was concentrating better, more aware of the surroundings, and more relaxed—and I was more aware of when I was being too smarting specific, as opposed to just looking for some sort of connection.

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Reading One is divided into four sections. Write one or two sentences that summarize each part of the article. Use your own words.

Part I: (paragraphs 1–5)

What are the signs of compulsive use of smartphones?

Part II: Hook or Habit? (paragraphs 6–18)

Is smartphone usage an addiction? Explain.

Part III: The Interrupted Life (paragraphs 19–24)

Explain how smartphones are a problem for our mental life.

Part IV: Managing Your Smartphone Use (paragraphs 25–33)

How can you control your usage?

DETAILS

Circle the best answer according to the reading.

1. People text while they are driving even though they know
 - a. they might get a ticket.
 - b. it is difficult to text and drive at the same time.
 - c. they are putting their lives in danger.
2. Computer technologies can be considered addictive because
 - a. they can change your mood and cause enjoyable feelings.
 - b. they cause you to suffer withdrawal symptoms if you are not able to use them.
 - c. they interfere with concentrating on more important activities.
3. Dr. Greenfield says that
 - a. smartphone addiction is a reality because 48% of managers and professionals now experience anxiety about losing their smartphones.
 - b. smartphone addiction is possible, but he hasn't seen it yet.
 - c. there are currently many smartphone addicts.
4. Smartphone usage can be considered unhealthy if
 - a. it is caused by "variable ratio reinforcement."
 - b. you use it to work on the weekends.
 - c. it disrupts your work or family life.
5. According to the journal *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, people aren't addicted to smartphones themselves, but rather to
 - a. checking habits.
 - b. social media.
 - c. using them while listening to lectures.
6. According to the journal *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, checking habits include checking for all of the following except
 - a. e-mails.
 - b. GPS directions.
 - c. news updates.
7. Nicholas Carr believes our relationship with smartphones is different from our relationship with computers, even laptops, for all the following reasons **except** that
 - a. apps are free or cheap.
 - b. we constantly have them with us.
 - c. we can use them to access social media.
8. Carr believes that humans have a deep primitive desire to know everything that is going on around them. This instinct is/was especially helpful when
 - a. checking social media.
 - b. trying to survive in primitive situations.
 - c. getting news updates.
9. In order to control smartphone use, experts suggest
 - a. not always answering your phone and even turning it off.
 - b. using your phone when you are with children, but not in a meeting.
 - c. feeling anxious or bored when your phone doesn't ring.
10. Taking predictable time off (PTO) caused all of the following effects **except**
 - a. more collaboration.
 - b. getting a new job.
 - c. improved work-life balance.