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# Smartphone Dilemma

## Take Two, We Used To Daydream

**HAVE YOU EVER FOUND** yourself picking up your phone a moment after you put it away? Do you slow down your walking so you can send a couple of texts? Ever stand behind someone texting while you patiently waited to place your order only to hear them say “ummmmm” when they get to the counter? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you’re not alone. The smartphone is becoming ever more interrupting to our daily lives. As much as it is an essential tool, if not controlled, it can become an addiction and annoyance.

The scenarios above are just your typical nuisances of living in a world with phones. Like dropping your phone on your head on the sofa or scrolling the news in the restroom and letting it slip into the toilet, you’re not really harming anyone but yourself.

Today, we’ll take a closer look at how the times we spend on the screen, phone and computer can impact our focus, relationships and even careers. We’ll delve into examples you’ve probably experienced, where someone’s phone suddenly becomes more important than the person talking in front of them. Whether it be the close ties we have with our current family, the developing ties with new contacts or the only ties our kids can form, there has to be a balance between social media and being social.

It’s easy to forget, with all the media that is plugged into our society, that phones didn’t always exist. Sure, we had computers and TVs for generations.

My parents used to say, “Too much TV will fry your brain.” It didn’t, and they still watch TV, too. But there is a huge difference between a television and the media in our pockets; TV shows end, sports games finish, news channels stop at 11, unless of course you’re watching C-Span in America. The modern smartphone is designed to keep you looking at it—notifications from countless apps keep you on their easy-to-use interface and ask you to refresh every minute for “breaking news.” Phones vibrate, ring, buzz and chime while we are doing a task and, sometimes, make us forget what we were originally doing.

Even the radio is on your phone these days in the form of a podcast. Podcasts are great for many reasons, including entertainment and education. Want to learn something new? There’s a podcast for that. Download one, but do yourself a favor and delete another app in place of it. I often delete my podcasts because they are producing more content than I can listen to in a given day. Every podcast I listen to has an advertisement to another great podcast I “may like.” So many of my favorite thinkers and storytellers have much to say. Tony Robbins, Tim Ferris, Malcolm Gladwell, NPR, can you guys please shorten your episodes? Whichever podcast hosting platform you use, the podcasts within them are advertising to get you to use it more. Don’t get me wrong, it’s great for meditation, traveling, tuning out our noisy neighbors or blasting music for a workout, but how much of the material

can you actually retain. Don’t our brains need to just think for themselves every now and then? Even the steady sound of traffic can be therapeutic after listening to multiple episodes of the highly entertaining series called *Serial*.

A similar algorithm on Netflix will tell you what you may want to “watch next.” You have about five seconds to decide if you want to cancel the next show or continue watching. The autoplay feature is intended to keep you on the screen and away from anything else important in life. If you watch a YouTube video, this same feature will play a similar video in just a few seconds. I listened to a fantastic TEDtalk by Zeynep Tufekci At TEDGlobal>NYC: “We’re building a dystopia just to make people click on ads.” She spoke about how clicking on those recommended YouTube videos can send you down a rabbit hole of stranger videos and conspiracies. Then I noticed even TED.com uses an algorithm to keep me watching their videos too. Before I knew it I had about eight more videos in my playlist. With four hours of videos to watch every day, how can we find to take care of our bodies? Yuval Noah Harari, Author of *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* put it simply, “Today we may be living in high-rise apartments with overstuffed refrigerators, but our DNA still thinks we are in the Savannah.” Our bodies are not designed to do what they are doing. We should be out developing quality relationships, having face to face conversations and interacting with our environment.



## Hey, Mr. Tamborine Man

When it comes to maintaining relationships, the phone, computer and social media can be a huge help. It's great for staying connected with friends and family. Liking the videos and photos of my friends' babies makes me feel like I know what's happening in their lives. It gives us something to talk about when I return home. In the history of mankind, it never been easier to communicate with someone. It has also never been easier to end a conversation. As the author of *Leaders Eat Last*, Simon Sinek says, social media is "great for maintaining relationships, but not building relationships." It wasn't until I returned home to visit my mother a few years ago that I realized how much time I wasted on my phone. I had to send a couple of more messages and emails before I could finish my sentence and eat breakfast with her.

"One second, Mom. Let me just finish this email," I would say as I desperately tried to look like I was finishing up something important. The truth was that it wasn't an email that couldn't wait and the reality is I have no recollection of what the email was about. I do, however, recall who I was sitting across from. I was only home for 10 days that Christmas year and I spent a lot of them filtering through spam, work emails and group texts. Chris Rock said in his latest Netflix stand up *Tamborine*: "I was married for 16 years in the era of the cell phone, which means my 16 years is actually longer than my parents' 40. In 16 years, I had more contact with my ex-wife than my parents had in 40 years." After leaving that Christmas I vowed I would never let my phone come in between me and my close relationships again. The next time I saw my family they would have all my attention.

But a shift happened the following year that blew my mind. In less than 12 months my mother was now the one who couldn't put down the phone. It's not her fault by any means and, of course, I love her even if she had important texts to send. But when a ding on her phone interrupted her, she would get lost in it for 10 minutes (I love you mom. I know you're reading this. You may be the only one reading this, actually). My mom is addicted. She wakes up with her phone next to her bed and sends message while sleeping and can't go back to sleep. She's losing 2-3 hours a night of sleep because of her addiction to her phone. She doesn't have the ability to see that this is bad because it has become so commonplace in our society.

Home isn't the only place I've seen the phone take away our attention. The gym used to be the place where you socialized. Though some would argue about the need for this, you only wore headphones if you didn't want to talk to people. Now you can

exert flatulence as loud as you want, and no one will know its origin. People may be listening to their music, but in between sets they take out their phone to "check in," selfie, scroll or some other nonsense. Phones at the gym are a distraction, period. My oldest and biggest brother, whose been working out his whole life, loves to rave about how he's at the gym for 3 to 4 hours a day. In between sets he'd check his phone, update his Instagram, stalk his ex girlfriend, then do another set. Lifting with him was easy because I had so much down time. I found myself doing squats and jumping jacks just to get my heart rate up. I'd be waiting for the weight rack while he was working out his thumbs. In Vietnam, I've seen people do sit-ups with their phone in hands. I get it for the treadmill. OK, exception made, and I'm guilty, but the sit-ups? Really?

Is it rude to tell people they are on their phone too much? Why do we get defensive? I know I do when someone catches me. You ever see someone walking and texting? You might have said to yourself "ugh...watch what you're doing." Chances are that was you at some point, too. Psychologist call this fundamental attribution error. We blame our poor behavior on external variables, but blame others behavior for their internal variables. We consider ourselves to be just looking for directions, but to someone else say, "this guy has no idea where he's going!"

"People watching" used to be a thing at parks and malls. Now we have phone stations to charge up if our battery dies. When we waited for an elevator to arrive we used to daydream. We used to imagine where else we would be, or reflect on our conversations with others. We would think about far out ideas and just let the mind wander. Will smartphones and social media make us lose our creative ability to daydream? I fear the day people are just walking straight into traffic because they are staring at their screens. When we daydream we reflect. We remember. We focus on relationships we had or want to have. When we scroll through a news feed like Instagram we focus on what others have and rarely reflect on our own possessions. To be fair, not everyone uses it for pointless scrolling. Many people, and teachers I know, use it to enhance their network and find good lessons. As a society, most of us aren't taught how to use it appropriately and end up just scrolling because there is nothing else to do. Checking the phone for notifications gives us that dopamine we crave. Similar to a drug, our brains like it, but it's short lasting. We keep going back to the phone for those updates and quick chemical shot to be released by our brain's neurons.

There is a certain value to reflecting on our own experiences and even face-to-face with others who shared

those experiences with us. Two cases I documented recently: I went to get my haircut at my usual *gio dau* place and saw a young lady taking selfies. From my angle she appeared to be on Snapchat retaking the same several poses for 20 minutes. She didn't look away from her phone once. She had no idea what was going on around her. Another time I saw a couple on a swing set along the beach. The girl was swinging with joy looking out into the ocean. Her boyfriend barely took his feet off the ground and sat there scrolling away on his phone. We need to focus on the people around us, more than the people we follow.

A recent article by ESPN writer and former pro NFL player Jason Witten titled "How Twitter has become NFL locker room poison," sheds light on how even athletes can lose focus. They are neck deep in social media and they must to maintain their brand and stay relevant. Many people can make money and receive endorsements this way. Witten highlights how people can use social media for good purposes. "Look at what J.J. Watt was able to accomplish last summer when Houston was devastated by flooding. We're talking millions of dollars for an incredible cause." But other athletes end up getting themselves fired or in a contract dispute because of something they said or posted during halftime.

After looking at how social media and cellphones can impact our relationships, our careers and our daily focus, I want to reiterate it does have powerful potential. Revolutions can spur change because of a tweet. Corruption can be captured and criminals can be prosecuted. Millions of dollars can be raised to help good causes. But keep in mind, we need to practice positive and healthy ways to use these tools if they are going to be permanent fixtures in our life. The wrong photo can cost you a job. Too much time on it can cost you sleep or a relationship. Parents, look your kids in the eyes. Walk with them, play Uno with them. Put your phone on airplane mode, so you can still capture those great moments with your camera. Be present with your loved ones now more than ever. Social media isn't going away any time soon. Relish these moments you have in person while you can.

Here are some other quick fixes that might change how you use your phone:

- Keep the phone out of reach when you're with important people.
- Delete your work email account from your phone.
- Put the phone on airplane mode while at the park with loved ones.
- Use "xtab" Chrome extension to limit the number of tasks you work on.
- Do a digital detox for a day or even a week.
- Leave the phone in the gym locker.
- Don't charge your phone next to your bed. Keep it in another room. ■