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Why Can't I Put My Phone Down?

Simple Solutions for Taming Parents' Tech Habits Without the Guilt and Shame

Webinar Summary by Dr Kristy Goodwin



You're not the only one struggling to put down your phone. Did you know...



Most adults are no longer more than 1metre away from their phone at any time.



The average adult user is spending 10 hours/week on Facebook, the most popular social media platform (followed by You Tube and Instagram).



The average smartphone user checks their phone **85** times/day.

13%

of adults check their phones on the toilet, also referred to as 'toilet tweeting'

35%

of adults think about first about their phone before their partner in the morning (and **17%** think about coffee first).

40%

of adults check social media just before falling asleep.



Signs you may have an unhealthy digital dependence



1. You need to use a mobile phone for increasing amounts of time to achieve the desired excitement (tolerance).



2. You're restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop your smartphone usage (withdrawal).



3. You've made repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop smartphone usage.



4. You're often preoccupied with smartphone use.



5. You often use a smartphone when feeling distressed, bored or agitated.



6. You lie to conceal the extent or involvement with smartphone use.



7. You've jeopardised or lost a significant relationship, job or educational or career opportunity because of your mobile phone usage.

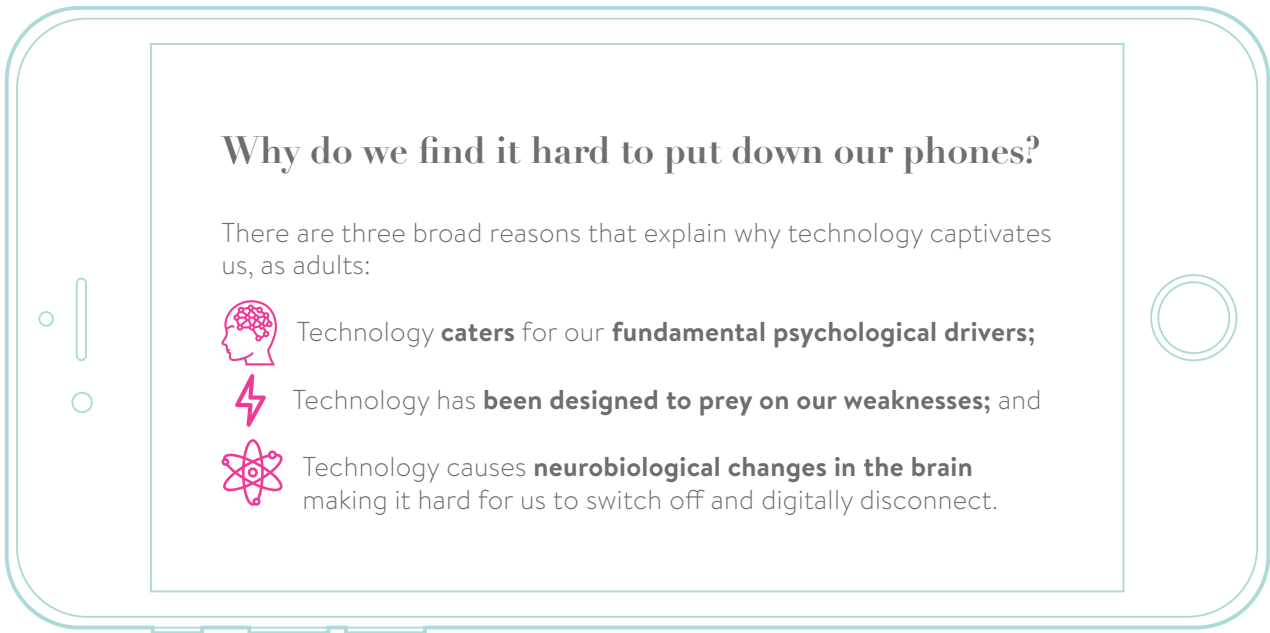


8. You rely on others to provide money to relieve desperate situations caused by mobile phone usage.

(Adapted from Addicted? Matt Noffs and Kieran Palmer, 2018)




Most of us are NOT addicted to our phones. We may instead have a digital dependence, a phone obsession, or some unhealthy digital habits




1. Technology caters for our fundamental psychological drivers

Self-determination theory suggests that we have three fundamental human needs:

 **CONNECTION-** we're biologically wired for relational connection. We want to feel like we belong. Technology caters for this need. This is why we enjoy using social media, or checking emails. We simply want to connect. For socially or geographically isolated parents, this need can be amplified and this is why we really revert to technology: to satiate our need for connection.


 **COMPETENCE-** as humans we want to appear capable. We seek to control the outcome and we want to experience mastery. Digital devices cater for this need. We can 'Google' information that will help us to be competent and we only ever post the 'highlight' reel on social media, to give an illusion of competency.

 **CONTROL-** as humans we want to self-initiate and self-regulate our own actions and we can have this need met with technology. As parents, we know we have limited control over our lives (and the minute we do think we're in control, someone misplaces their schoolbag, or there's a nappy explosion). Our phones and technology give us a perceived locus of control.

As parents we also crave:







NOVELTY- if we're really honest, parenting can be monotonous at times. Our phones always provide new and interesting information, often with little effort on our behalf. This is very different from the predictable and somewhat mundane nature of parenting.

ESCAPISM- our digital devices offer, even if only momentarily, a reprieve from the constant demands of parenthood. We can live vicariously through someone's Instagram holiday feed, or play an online game that provides a moment of respite.





 **PURSUIT OF PLEASURE-** our screens offer us moments of solace and we usually derive pleasure from using them. As a result, our brains release the neurotransmitter dopamine (pleasure hormone) and we start to crave more and more.







2. Technology has been designed to prey on our weaknesses

-  **BAD FORECASTING-** as humans we often under-estimate how long tasks will take to complete. We tell ourselves we'll just quickly check social media for five minutes and before we know it, we're scrolling for an hour.
-  **STATE OF INSUFFICIENCY-** when we're scrolling through social media, or trying to tame our inbox, we rarely have the feeling of being 'complete' or 'done', so we get hooked into always checking.
-  **STATE OF FLOW-** when we use our phones, we often become so engrossed with what we're doing that we lose track of time.
-  **LOSS AVERSION-** we often suffer from fear of missing out (FOMO). This keeps us in a cycle of constantly checking in (social media or email) and playing (gaming).
-  **INTERMITTENT VARIABLE REWARDS-** like poker machines, many games and social media platforms offer variable rewards, and these can cause users to become obsessed or dependent. Social media sites withhold likes and comments to get users hooked into intermittently checking in to see how many likes and comments we've received.
-  **PUSH TECHNIQUES-** the use of alerts and notifications, red icons, auto-play videos, clickbait headlines are some of the deliberate ways that technologies have been designed to get and keep us hooked on continually checking our phones.

3. Our devices can cause changes in our brain and body

-  **DOPAMINE-** One of the reasons we gravitate towards digital devices, is that most of the time, using screens and digital devices is a pleasurable activity. Our brains release the neurotransmitter dopamine. Therefore, it's logical that we want to spend more time experiencing this pleasurable state, so we can easily become distracted by technology and start reaching for our phone. We know that the frontal lobe, which helps us to make decisions and manage our impulses, can be hijacked by dopamine.
-  **OTHER HORMONES-** Our brains also release adrenaline and serotonin and activate the reward pathways when we use devices, making it difficult to switch them off.
-  **ALTERED PHYSICAL STATES-** technology often alters our physical states (increased heart rates, hits of adrenaline etc) and this activates the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight mode of thinking) which makes it more challenging for us to control our impulses and so we jump back into social media and start scrolling.
-  **DISREGULATION-** our phones offer a smorgasbord of sensory stimulation. As a result, our sensory and nervous systems can get hyper-aroused and we find it hard to self-regulate, so we can get agitated and frustrated when we switch off, so we tend to want to spend more time scrolling.

Concerns About Our Digital Dependence

-  **TECHNOFERENCE-** studies have begun to investigate the impact on how the digital pull is impacting the parent-child-relationship. Studies have shown a link between parents' smartphone-use and children's behaviour. Are we missing the micro-moments because of our digital distractions? Do we become frustrated with our kids because they distract us from our phones?
-  **RELATIONSHIPS-** there's emerging relationships that our relationships with partners is being compromised because of phone habits.
-  **PHYSICAL SAFETY-** anecdotal reports indicate that more children are presenting to emergency departments with playground injuries and there are even reported fatalities because of parental digital distraction.
-  **ROLE MODELING-** kids' brains have mirror neurons meaning that they're biologically wired to copy and imitate. If their parents are constantly using devices, kids may emulate these behaviours. If we want to tame our kids' screen time habits, we need to first control our own.



POOR SLEEP- 40% of Australian adults are experiencing some form of inadequate sleep each night. The blue light from screens and the presence of phones in the bedroom can compromise the quality and quantity of sleep that we get each night. This can cause a vicious cycle. The frontal lobe (logical part of the brain responsible for managing impulses and working memory) doesn't work effectively when we're tired, so we tend to revert to poor tech habits when we're exhausted and this creates a vicious cycle (have you ever noticed you reach for your phone more when you're tired?)



ABSENCE OF BOREDOM- as humans we need white space and boredom to enter what neuroscientists call 'mind-wandering' or the 'default mode' of thinking (i.e. daydreaming). When we're bored, we often come up with creative ideas and solutions to problems we could have spent months agonising over. If we're always reaching for our phones, we deprive ourselves of this essential time.



WELLBEING- studies have shown that there's correlation between heavy screen users and mental health issues (note, it doesn't prove that technology causes these issues). Our brains and bodies need regular breaks for wellbeing.



INFOBESITY- "When information is cheap, attention becomes expensive." | James Gleick, *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood*¹. We are often stressing our brains out because we're trying to process and store too much information. Our brains reach their 'cognitive load' and we become overwhelmed and this can adversely impact our wellbeing.

When we're constantly tethered to technology, we're neither here nor there.

Myth of Multi-Tasking

Many of us believe we can multi-task- we think we can reply to a text message, check Instagram and have fifteen Internet-browsers simultaneously open and watch our kids at the same time and cook dinner. However, the brain is incapable of multi-tasking. What we're actually doing is task switching or engaging in continuous partial attention (CPA²). And this can cause our brains to be stressed.

MULTI-TASKING COSTS-



IMPAIRS OUR PERFORMANCE- Interruptions disrupt our attention and this results in increased error rates (and often frustration too).



CORTISOL DUMP- The brain releases cortisol, the stress hormone, when multi-tasking, which inhibits neural pathways from forming. Put simply, stressed brains cannot learn and recall details.



GLUCOSE DEPLETION- The brain uses glucose when multi-tasking which explains why we feel tired or 'foggy' after engaging in multi-tasking.



INCORRECT BRAIN REGIONS ACTIVATED FOR MEMORY RETRIEVAL- Information goes to the striatum (useful for procedural information) and not the hippocampus (the memory centre of the brain).



MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES- Frequent multi-tasking can be a predictor of depression and social anxiety³. It's important to note that the research has not yet shown if this is a causal relationship (the research proves correlation only at this stage).



RESUMPTION LAG- A study showed that the average adult takes 23 minutes to resume their attention after a distraction⁴.

1. Gleick, J., 2012, *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood*, Pantheon Books, Boston.

2. Rosen, L., 2010, 'Welcome to the iGeneration!' *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed for Quick Review*, 75(8), pp. 8-12.

3. Becker MW, Alzhabi R, Hopwood CJ, 'Media multitasking is associated with symptoms of depression and social anxiety', *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 16(2), pp. 132-135.

4. Mark G, Gudith D, Klocke U. *The cost of interrupted work: more speed and stress. In Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems 2008 Apr 6 (pp. 107-110). ACM.*

Strategies to Tame Our Tech Habits

We need be in control of our tech habits and not the other way around where technology controls us! Are we a slave to the screen, or have we tamed our tech habits?



SET PERSONAL POLICIES - establish boundaries around when and where you'll use your phone. Could you leave your phone in the car when you're at the park? Can you decide to only respond to work emails during the work day, or perhaps from 7:30-8pm at night? Could you plan three times of the day when you'll use social media and adhere to these times? Remember, planning when and where you'll use your phone, as opposed to saying when you won't is easier to follow.



ESTABLISH TECH-FREE ZONES AT HOME- nominate specific places in your house where digital devices aren't used. Some places I recommend for families include meal areas, bedrooms, bathrooms, cars and play areas (remember, to make your own rules). Establishing the zones is easy but sticking to them is a little more challenging.



CREATE A LANDING ZONE AT NIGHT- nominate a specific area of the house where you will charge and store digital devices at night, outside of the bedroom.



MINIMISE DIGITAL DISTRACTIONS- turn off alerts and notifications to minimise the psychological appeal. Studies have shown that average smartphone users with notifications enabled, receive 45.9 notifications each day! Every time you see a red icon or a notification, it conditions your brain to be in a heightened state of alertness, stress and fear and this activates the sympathetic nervous systems.



MONITOR YOUR USAGE- sometimes it's such a shock to quantify the number of hours we're spending with our phones each week. You can use Screen Time (iOS) and Digital Wellbeing tools (Android) to quantify the time. Individual social media apps are also now providing users with this data (see next point).



DIGITAL TOOLS- Use Screen Time (iOS) and Digital Wellbeing (Google) to help impose limits on what you can access and when you use your phone. With Screen Time, create a usage report (daily or weekly), set downtime (e.g. turn off your phone between set hours) and apply app limits (set limits on categories such as entertainment and game or for specific apps). With Android Pie, **monitor your usage by calculating how much time you've** spent in individual apps and set daily time limits for apps that keep you hooked longer than you'd like (for example, 15 minutes tops on Instagram), set do not disturb (silence your device completely or specify which alerts you'll see), personalise your alerts, snooze and schedule at a convenient time and use wind down to automatically turn your phone to greyscale and enable do not disturb at a set time.



SET YOUR SOCIAL LIMITS- With **Instagram** you can go to the Activity Dashboard (to see your daily average of time spent on the app), use the Daily Reminder (to set a time limit and receive notifications when you've reached your limit) and Mute Push Notifications. With **You Tube**, you can monitor Time Watched (can you can also set a reminder to take a break after a certain amount of time and disable auto-play) and Scheduled Digest (so you can get all your alerts bundled together at one time). With **Facebook** (still under development at the time this webinar was released), you can set Time on Facebook (see daily averages), Manage Your Time (to set a time limit and receive a notification when you've reached your limit) and Mute Push Notifications (which silences push notifications, or choose which alerts you'd like to receive).



GO GREYSCALE- colourful icons give our brain rewards when we unlock our device (red is a trigger colour that activates a sense of urgency and panic). So set your phone to greyscale to remove the positive reinforcements and you'll likely check your phone less.

For iOS devices, go to Settings > General > Accessibility > Accessibility Shortcut (bottom) > Colour Filters. This allows you to quickly triple-tap the home button to toggle grayscale on and off, so you keep colour when you need it.



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Enabling greyscale differs for different models of Android phones, but it's typically accessed via the Accessibility menu > developer options > simulate colour space > Monochromacy



CREATE FOLDERS- create a folder called 'Things I'll later regret...' where you store the apps that are your weaknesses. You could also create folders for work, entertainment, kids' apps etc. Try to keep functional apps only on your home screen (i.e. phone, camera, maps, weather).



LAUNCH APPS BY TYPING- drag your digital weaknesses from the home screen. Swipe down and type the name of the app you want to open (instead of launching it from the home screen). Typing the name requires more effort and makes you pause and consider, do I really want to do this?

On Android you can use the Search Box on your home screen.

iOS: For best results, turn off Siri Suggestions (Settings > Siri & Search > Siri Suggestions to off)



DO NOT DISTURB- if you find it challenging to not look at your devices if and when you receive an alert or phone call, enable the 'Do Not Disturb' feature. Remember, you can personalise this, so you can have this function activated and still receive calls from important numbers (ie. Your partner, childcare, school or your mother).



PROXIMITY- Having your phone out of eye-sight will also help to minimise distractions. It's the old 'out of sight, out of mind' strategy, where we're unlikely to yearn for the device if we cannot see it. Could you pop it in a drawer, or in the pantry? Could there be a landing zone in your house where phones go?



REMOVE SOCIAL MEDIA APPS OR GAMES FROM YOUR PHONE- if you really struggle to control your use, physically remove the games from your smartphone. Using a laptop or desktop computer adds barriers to access.



REMOVE YOUR DIGITAL WEAKNESSES OFF THE HOME SCREEN- if Instagram is your weakness simply remove it from your home screen.



CULL- unfollow, unsubscribe and unfriend to reduce the mental load and number of distractions and the amount of time you spend on your phone.



CREATE A MOTIVATIONAL SCREEN SAVER- when trying to initially break up with your phone, create a screen saver that reminds you of why you're trying to spend less time on your device.



ARTICULATE WHAT YOU'RE DOING WHEN YOU'RE ON YOUR PHONE WHEN YOUR KIDS ARE AROUND- this tips keeps you accountable and helps your kids to understand that you're using it in functional ways.



PICK UP THE PHONE- stop the ping-pong, back-and-forth messages or DMs and either call the person, or send them an audio note.



ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE BORED- we often revert and retreat to our phones when bored... waiting in the queue at the shops. Give your brain the white space it needs.



INTRODUCE SCREEN SWAPS- instead of scrolling through social media at night, could you read a book, or have a bath?



ASK 'WHAT WOULD FUTURE YOU LIKE TO REMEMBER?'- do you want your kids' childhoods a distant memory because you were digitally distracted? How do you want your kids to think of you?



MINDFULNESS- there's increasing research evidence to support the use of mindfulness techniques to assist us better manage our attention (and also promote general wellbeing too).



BREATHING TECHNIQUES- deep breathing, particularly, diaphragmatic (deep stomach) breathing can be a valuable tool to help us control our attention. Simple deep breathing techniques can help to activate our parasympathetic nervous system which helps us to calm down and supports our capacity to pay attention and not reach for our phones.



Making Changes

- ❌ **DON'T GO COLD TURKEY-** completely removing your phone (digital amputation) won't help you with long-term behaviour shifts.
- ❌ **DON'T DO A DIGITAL DETOX-** detoxes can create a binge and purge cycle.
- ❌ **DON'T MAKE RADICAL CHANGES-** and try to implement all of the strategies I've shared here. Start with 1-2 small changes you can make. Master these changes and then try different things. Over time you can make more changes. For example, could you check your phone after breakfast. Then stretch it out until after school drop off?

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