



How to Break Up with Your Phone

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Introduction

An Open Letter to My Phone

“Thanks to you, I never need to worry about being alone. Any time I’m anxious or upset, you offer a game or newsfeed”

“These days, I can’t even remember the last time I was bored. Then again, I can’t remember the last time my friends and I made it through a meal without anyone pulling out a phone. Or how it felt to be able to read an entire magazine article in one sitting.”

Introduction

The goal is not to throw your phone under a bus. Smartphones are amazing tools.
They're:

- cameras, DJs, link to family and friends, traffic, weather, calendars and contacts

The impact of smartphones: We feel busy but ineffective. Connected but lonely.

The problem isn't smartphones themselves. It's our relationships with them:

- Smartphones have infiltrated our lives so quickly that we never stopped to consider what relationship to them we want- or the effect of these relationships may be having on our lives
- We never stopped to think which phone features make us feel good, and which make us feel bad

"Breaking up" with your phone = giving yourself a chance to stop and think

- noticing which parts of your relationship are working vs. not
- setting boundaries between your online and offline lives
- becoming conscious of how and why you use your phone

Just because behaviors and feelings are universal does not mean that they are harmless:

- ~80% of Americans check their phones within a half hour of waking
- >80% percent of Americans keep their phones near them "almost all the time during waking hours"

Smartphone compulsion test questionnaire:

- Do you find yourself spending more time texting, etc as opposed to talking to people in person?

- Do you find yourself viewing and answering texts, etc at all hours of the day—even if it means interrupting other things you are doing?
- Do you text, Facebook message, surf, etc while driving or doing other activities requiring attention and concentration?
- Does use of your smartphone decrease your productivity at times?
- Do you feel reluctant to be without your smartphone, even for a short time?
- Do you find yourself mindlessly checking your smartphone many times a day, even when you know there is likely nothing new or important to see?

Author's Anecdote:

- Over the past few years, “My attention span is shorter. My memory seems weaker. My focus flickers... an external factor at play— my phone.”
- Got first smartphone in 2010 → soon carrying it everywhere she went and picking up it constantly. Sometimes for seconds, sometimes for hours at a time
- Also: reading fewer books, spending less time with friends/hobbies, that she knew brought joy. Shortened attention span made it harder to be present in those other activities even when she did do them. But at the time, didn't realize these things might be connected
- Often picked up phone “just to check,” → resurface an hour later wondering where time went. Respond to a text → get caught in a 30-minute back-and-forth that felt more demanding yet less-fulfilling than an in-person convo
- Increasing tendency to “app-source” aspects of life (gps directions, deciding where to eat) → the more she used phone to navigate life, the less capable she felt navigating without it

Research shows, spending extended time on phones → can change both structure and function of our brains—including ability to form new memories, think deeply, focus, and absorb/remember what we read

Author's experiment: 24-hour “digital detox” from phones and all internet-enabled devices

- Without phones to distract, time seemed to slow down.
- Went on walks. Read books. Talked more. She felt more grounded, as if she were getting back in touch with a part of herself that she hadn't even realized had gone missing.

We're never going to break up with our phones unless we think it's vitally important to do so.

Part 1: The Wake-Up

Ch 1: Our Phones Are Designed to Addict Us

Smartphones are unlike radios, movies, television, video games, etc that also caused panic when they were first introduced. **Smartphones are different:**

- actively nag and disrupt us
- grant access to the *entire internet*
- near us at all times
- “Your telephone in the 1970s didn't have a thousand engineers on the other side of the telephone who were redesigning it...to be more and more persuasive.”

Tech CEO's (Steve Jobs, Bill Gates) “strictly limit their children's screen time... they seem to know something that the rest of us don't.”

Don't pretend that smartphones aren't a “real” addition. Not all addictions are drugs/alcohol— include behaviors too (ex: gambling). Also, addictions exist on a spectrum - it's possible to be addicted without something destroying your life

“User engagement”: explicit goal of getting us to spend as much time and attention as possible on our devices

Ch 2: Putting the “Dope” in Dopamine

We blame our binges on ourselves, on a lack of willpower. But remember, tech designers deliberately manipulate our dopamine responses to make it extremely difficult to stop using their products

Ch 3: The Tricks of the Trade

“Never before in history have the decisions of a handful of designers (mostly men, white, living in SF, aged 25–35) working at 3 companies had so much impact on how millions of people around the world spend their attention.” —Tristan Harris

“Intermittent rewards”:

- We aren’t hooked by consistency, but unpredictability
- Knowing that something could happen, but not when/if it will occur
- aka “the reason we date jerks”
- Another device that uses intermittent rewards to drive compulsive behavior? Slot machines.

FOMO:

- our phones incite anxiety by providing new info and emotional triggers every time we pick them up
- We worry any time we put them down, we might miss something

“The closer we pay attention to the options we’re given, the more we’ll notice when they don’t actually align with our true needs.” - Tristan Harris

If our smartphones excel at one thing, it's making sure we never, ever have to be alone with ourselves.

- Study: "simply being alone with their own thoughts for 15 minutes was apparently so aversive that it drove many participants to self-administer an electric shock that they had earlier said they would pay to avoid."

Ch 4: Social Media Sucks

Why social media apps are free:

- Because we are not actually the customers, and the social media platform itself is not the product. Instead, the customers are advertisers. And the product being sold is our attention.
- "You don't pay for Facebook. Advertisers pay for Facebook. You get to use it for free because your eyeballs are what's being sold there."

In 2014, Facebook users were spending a collective 39,757 years' worth of attention on the site, every single day.

- Attention not spent on families, or our friends, or ourselves.

Our attention is the most valuable thing we have:

- Once we've spent it, we can never get it back
- We experience, and remember, only what we pay attention to
- When we decide what to pay attention to in the moment, we are making a broader decision about how we want to spend our lives

Charts of trends in teenage behaviors from 1976 to 2016:

- Time spent hanging out with friends, age of getting drivers' licenses to dating to sleep to sex to loneliness

- Every chart: the slope changes dramatically after 2007, the year the first iPhone was released
- “There is compelling evidence that the devices we’ve placed in young people’s hands are having profound effects on their lives—and making them seriously unhappy.”
- Today’s teens may be physically safer than their predecessors (ex: less likely to drive drunk). But because they are “on their phone, in their room, alone, and often distressed.”

Facebook doesn’t just know everything you do/share on Facebook:

- Facebook buttons and cookies (small files left behind on computer for companies to track your activities across sites)
- Facebook also many of the sites you’ve visited, apps used, and links clicked
- Partnerships with external data-collection companies (ex: Equifax) → it knows details of your offline life too. Including income and essentially all credit card purchases

Ch 5: The Truth about Multi-Tasking

We’re often shifting our focus so rapidly that we never even give ourselves enough time to get in gear

- When’s the last time you spent 25 min just doing one thing?
- Makes us: unproductive, difficulty thinking, mentally exhausted

Ch 6: Your Phone is Changing Your Brain

Recent science: the structure/function of our brains is constantly changing, and we have some control over the process, through thought+practice

Famous study on London cab drivers who memorize ~25k streets:

- posterior hippocampus (responsible for spatial memories) was larger in cab drivers than non-cabbies
- Time studying → physical impact on brain
- Further, the longer someone had been a cab driver → the larger the change

Americans (in 2017) spending an average ~4 hrs / day on phones

- If you spend 4 hrs / day doing anything, you're going to get pretty good at it
- Worth investigating what skills these hours are training us to develop

Most time we spend on smartphones isn't concentrated thought, but picking up phones for minutes/seconds at a time

- Even when using phones for longer stretches, not engrossed in one activity. Scrolling/swiping between screens
- Even when staying within an app (ex: social media), we're not focusing on anything long. Every tweet, message, post pulls our brains into different direction

Yet, we don't we only casually focus on our phones, we are completely absorbed. An oxymoron: an intensely focused state of distraction.

Ch 7: Your Phone is Killing Your Attention Span

Humans are naturally distractible

- In nature, things are often trying to kill us
- We want attention drawn to changes in our environments, as these might indicate a threat
- "Humans exhibit an innate drive to forage for information, similar to how other animals are driven to forage for food"

Concentration requires our brains to do 2 difficult things at once.

1. Choose what to pay attention to

- a. Via prefrontal cortex (responsible for executive “top-down” functions - decision making, self-control)
- b. “decision fatigue”: making too many decisions can tire prefrontal cortex
 - i. Focus wavers, lose ability to distinguish what’s important to pay attention to
- c. Relatively new part of brain, and one of the weakest. Under stress, it hands reins to more primitive areas of brain

2. Ignore distractions

- a. Even w/o man-made distractions like phones, brains are exposed to onslaught of stimulation via senses (sights, tastes, smells, sounds). Stream of new info to act on / absorb

Reading a printed book is fundamentally different from reading on digital phone/computer:

- When reading physical book, distractions are external (dog barking, etc) → easy for brains to decide what’s important vs ignorable
- When digital reading, links and ads are everywhere
- Digital reading has 3 major problems
 1. Every link encountered → brain must make split-second decision whether to click
 - a. These decisions so frequent / tiny they go unnoticed
 - b. But we can’t make split-second decisions + simultaneously think deeply - the two acts use different competing brain regions
 - c. Every tiny decision pulls attention from what we’re reading. Harder to absorb and think about it critically
 2. Online distractions are embedded in content we’re trying to focus on

- a. Unlike dog barking in background
 - b. Difficult for brains to distinguish what to pay attention to vs ignore
3. When mental fatigue causes brains give in to distracting clickbait or swiping → we reinforce the same mental circuits that make it hard to sustain focus
- a. We get better at not staying focused

The result: the more we read online, the more we teach our brains to skim:

- This skill is honed due to constantly facing info overload
- But problematic as our default, we become worse at reading + thinking deeply

Ch 8: Your Phone Messes with Your Memory

Schemas: long-term memories don't exist in isolation, but in networks of connected memories - "schemas" that link new info to existing info, help us identify commonalities

“Working memory”

- everything held in mind at a given moment
- your consciousness
- the gateway through which every long-term memory must pass

“The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two”

- famous 1956 study: we're able to hold 5-9 items in our working memory

Our limited capacity is easily overloaded

- “cognitive load”: the more info your working memory is trying to handle → less likely to remember any of it
- Bc takes time and mental energy to transfer info from working memory to long-term

Smartphones - overload our working memories

- apps, emails, news feeds, home screen - a virtual avalanche of info

When we train our attention on our phones:

1. We miss everything else going on around us
 - a. If don't have an experience to begin with, not going to remember it later
2. Cognitive overload → less likely to remember the info/experiences we *did* manage to pay attention to

Ch 9: Stress, Sleep, and Satisfaction

Flow: feeling when completely engaged in an experience. So present you feel outside of time. Flow leads to the sorts of moments that make life rich

Phone are tools of distraction. If distracted, you can't immerse yourself in an experience, and can't - by definition - get into flow

Ch 10: How to Take Back Your Life

Mindfulness: "Mindfulness is about seeing the world more clearly"

2011 study on 100 smokers:

- "mindfulness" group vs control group - the gold standard "Freedom from Smoking" program
- Mindfulness group taught to:
 - identify and pay attention to triggers + cravings

- relax into cravings without trying to stop them. Simply observe emotional and physical feelings and “ride out” cravings
- Mindfulness group quit at twice the rate of the control group, and experienced fewer relapses

The “Phone Breakup” program utilizes mindfulness:

- We’ll pay deliberate attention to our emotions, thoughts, and reactions without judging ourselves or trying to change anything
- We’ll notice our cravings, and practice deciding how/if we respond

If you try to cut back on your phone use without first figuring out what you’re trying to achieve or avoid, you’re doomed to fail. Either you’ll relapse, or replace with another similarly destructive habit