

PHONE ADDICTION



Credit: SoberRecovery

The following is an article by Angelica Bottaro published in verywell health and updated on 18 October 2023. It was medically reviewed by Elle Markman PsyD MPH.

The use of cell phones has become an integral part of society. While cell phones have many benefits, many people have developed what some researchers consider an addiction to their phones that can have negative effects on well-being. According to some research, roughly 27.9% of young adults are addicted to their cell phones.

What is Phone Addiction?

Cell phone addiction may be categorized as a type of behavioural addiction that presents when a person can't go without their cell phone, their excessive use causes adverse consequences, or they experience symptoms similar to withdrawal when they do. While cell phone addiction is not officially recognized as an addiction in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (DSM-5), it does present with similar characteristics as other behavioural addictions, such as gambling.

What is the DSM-5?

The DSM-5 is the American Psychiatric Association's official handbook that mental health professionals use to assess and diagnose a variety of mental health disorders.

Who is at Risk of Phone Addiction?

Research has found that although anyone can be at risk for this type of addiction, it is most commonly found in adolescents. Teens in particular use their phones with high frequency, while cell phone use tends to decrease gradually as a person gets older. People who get phones at a younger age are also more likely to present with addictive behaviours than those who get them later in life.

Cell Phone Risk Between the Sexes

Both young boys and girls are at a higher risk of developing an addiction to their cell phones, but there may be somewhat different patterns of use. Girls typically use their phones for social interaction, while boys use phones for this reason and to access gaming applications. Males also show a higher tendency to use their phones in risky situations. Social media addiction may go hand in hand with phone addiction. It is associated with poor sleep quality, body perception issues, and depression.

What are the Symptoms of Phone Addiction?

Some new terms have emerged to describe characteristics of phone addiction. They include:

- **Nomophobia:** Fear tied to going without one's phone.
- **Textaphrenia:** Fear of the inability to receive or send text messages.
- **Ringxiety:** Feeling as though a notification has come through on your phone when it hasn't.
- **Textxiety:** Feeling anxious because of receiving and responding to text messages immediately.

Some symptoms of phone addiction include:

- You are constantly reaching for your phone.
- You spend much of your time on your phone.
- You wake in the night to check if your phone has any notifications.
- You feel negative emotions such as anger, sadness, or anxiety when you don't have your phone or can't check your phone.
- Using your phone has led to an injury or accident, such as a car crash from texting while driving.
- The amount of time you spend on your phone affects your professional and personal life.
- When you try to limit your phone use, you end up relapsing in a short period of time.

Signs from Others

While it can be difficult to notice your own phone addiction, one telltale sign you are forming an addiction is if someone in your life mentions your phone overuse to you. They may express concern about how much you are on your phone or your behaviour while you are not using it.

What are the Effects of Phone Addiction?

Studies show that cell phone overuse can have a negative impact on your health in a variety of ways. Some effects of phone addiction include:

- Muscle pain and stiffness.
- Fatigue.

- Blurry vision.
- Dry eyes.
- Red or irritated eyes.
- Auditory illusions (hearing your phone ring or vibrate when it's not).
- Thumb or wrist pain.
- Loss of interest in other activities you once enjoyed.
- Insomnia and sleep disturbances.
- Worsened school or work performance.
- Heightened conflicts with your social group or family.
- Feelings of irritability or unease when you don't have your phone.
- An increased risk of developing depression or anxiety.
- Putting yourself in dangerous situations by using your phone when you shouldn't be.
- Feelings of guilt, helplessness, or loneliness when you go without your phone.

Cell Phone Addiction and Dopamine

Cell phone addiction is similar to other types of addiction because of its effect on dopamine, a chemical in the body that causes feelings of pleasure. Cell phone use has been shown to stimulate the production and release of dopamine, which drives the need to use it more and more.

How to Break the Addiction

Breaking any type of addiction isn't easy, but it is possible. First, you must acknowledge the issues it's causing in your life. Once you have determined that you need to break your addiction, you can:

- **Identify the reasons:** Research has found that people who are on their phones constantly may be trying to escape issues or problems in their life. By determining if the root cause of your phone addiction is to escape problems, you can address and treat the underlying issues.
- **Consider therapy:** Certain types of therapy, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), have proven effective in helping people overcome addictions. Other types of effective therapies for addictions are contingency management, motivational interviewing, and couples counselling (if it is affecting your relationships).

Tips to Beat Phone Addiction on Your Own

While addictions often require professional help, not all people will want to go that route. If you want to try to get over addiction on your own you can:

- Buy a cell phone lockbox that only opens after a set amount of time. This will limit your use.
- Remove apps that take up the majority of your time.
- Eliminate notifications on your phone so you aren't summoned to check it every time a notification appears.
- Charge your phone in an inaccessible place so it's harder to get to.
- Try to replace phone use with other activities you enjoy.
- Switch to a non-smart phone.

How to Prevent Phone Addiction

The best prevention method for phone addiction is avoidance. If you have a phone, you can prevent becoming addicted by using it only when necessary. This means deleting any apps that don't serve a purpose and using your time to connect with people in other ways.

For parents with young children, limit your child's phone use by only allowing them to use it on your terms, or avoid buying them a phone altogether until they are above a certain age. Since children in their teen years are most at risk, you could hold off on buying them a phone until it is absolutely necessary.

If your child must have a phone for safety reasons, consider buying a phone that doesn't have the ability to download apps that may lead to addiction. This way they will still be able to contact you or their friends if they need to but will not have access to time-consuming apps.

When to Contact a Healthcare Provider

If you feel as though your phone use has begun to control your life, or your loved ones have mentioned their concerns to you, it may be time to seek out professional help. You can do this by speaking to your healthcare provider for referrals to a therapist or by signing up for a digital detox, a time when you give up tech devices.

Summary

While not formally recognized by the DSM-5, problematic cell phone use shares many similarities with behavioural addictions. A person with a phone addiction will have difficulty staying off their phone and could lose interest in things they once enjoyed because of excessive phone use. Those most at risk of developing a phone addiction are teens and young adults.

Signs of phone addiction include feeling irritable or negative when going without a phone, being unable to go without a phone for long periods of time, or using a phone so much that it negatively affects physical health or mental health.

While phone addiction does come with negative consequences, there are ways to beat it. A person can seek out professional help through a therapist or practice control techniques that limit phone use.

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