

TECHNOLOGY

iPhone Addiction Making Us Dumb And Dumber



JULIE VALLONE | 2/20/2015

If you're like many people, your smartphone is at your side day and night. You use it to wake you up in the morning; to call, email, text, or Instagram people all day long; to guide you to an unfamiliar location; to lull you to sleep at night with nature sounds.

Is that a problem? Are you becoming too dependent on, or even addicted to, your smartphone?

Quite possibly, several studies say, though theories abound on how best to cure the problem.

"Cellphones are so multifunctional, and every week we're coming up with more and more uses," said James Roberts, professor of marketing at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. "Of course, they're highly portable; they're always with us, in our pockets. All that positions cellphones to be highly addictive."

Roberts and colleagues recently published a study on the topic in the Journal of Behavioral Addictions. According to their study, college students spend more than eight hours a day on average using their cellphones. Roberts said this habit has

dramatically changed the behavior of students and how they communicate and relate to each other.

"Ten years ago, I would walk into a classroom and kids would be bubbling — just talking and laughing. Now, I walk in and it's like a morgue," he said. "Everyone is their own separate entity, doing their own thing on the cellphones. They're together, but alone."

Keep That Phone In Sight

About 60% of participants in the Baylor study concede they might be addicted to their phones. Many students indicated they get agitated if their phone is not in sight.

The Baylor findings were mirrored by a recent University of Missouri study. While monitoring the blood pressure of study participants, researchers asked them to complete puzzles, first with their smartphones nearby and then with the phones farther away.

The result: Participants' heart rates and blood pressure levels went up significantly when they were separated from their phones. In addition, they performed more poorly on puzzles.

"Our findings suggest that iPhone separation can negatively impact performance on mental tasks," Russell Clayton, a doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri and lead author of the study, said in a press release. Of 136 survey respondents, 117 were users of **Apple (AAPL)** iPhones.

The Missouri researchers, in fact, recommend that users avoid parting with their phones during daily situations that involve a great deal of attention, such as taking tests or completing work assignments.

Jonathan Alpert, a New York City psychotherapist and author of "Be Fearless: Change Your Life in 28 Days," focuses on a different approach. He says people need to recognize they're too dependent on their smartphones and try to change that.

"If using an iPhone interferes with relationships, finances, health, or careers, it could be an addiction, or at least a pretty serious problem," he said.

He cited frequent arguments with spouses over phone use, heavy online shopping, carpal tunnel problems and avoiding work in favor of playing video games.

Both Alpert and Roberts say dependence on smartphones has made many people oblivious or even in denial of the dangers of using them in some situations, such as in cars or even walking on busy streets.

Alpert says he watched a 20-something man, eyes glued to his smartphone, walk directly into a crosswalk in spite of its red light for pedestrians. Cars had to slam on their breaks to avoid hitting him.

"I was just astonished when I saw it. He literally walked right into an intersection," Alpert recalled. "What was most shocking, though, was that he never even looked up. He just kept walking, unfazed."

Not Just Issue For The Young

If you're thinking this is just an issue for younger people, think again.

"It's more intensified in the younger generations, but we're seeing the same kind of addictive qualities in a lot of different age groups," Roberts said.

Alpert also pointed to a more subtle, but equally problematic, effect of overdependence on smartphones.

"We're becoming dumber," he said. "We've become so reliant on technology, people don't remember phone numbers anymore. They don't know how to read a map, and can't get from point A to point B without GPS."

"If their phone doesn't give them an alarm just before an appointment, they'll miss the appointment. It makes life more convenient, but it dumbs us down."

Roberts agrees.

"It's a kind of learned helplessness, which is the double-edged sword of technology," he said.

Roberts' study noted some structural similarities between smartphones and "one-armed bandit" casino slot machines that have triggered many a gambling addiction. These may include stylized ring tones, beeps and whistles signaling incoming messages, vibrant graphics, and even certain controls such as buttons and wheels.

"Such characteristics may well act as both inducers and reinforcers of cellphone use, ultimately inciting addiction," the Baylor study noted.

Don't Go Cold Turkey

Roberts says one of the biggest problems with cellphone dependence or addiction is that people miss out on more important parts of life.

"We have traded meaningful pursuits, like getting together with friends, or travel, or doing something good for other people, for going over the top on (mobile game) 'Candy Crush' or reading Instagrams or watching (short-video) Vines or any of the many other things we can do on the cellphone," he said. "It's kind of a trivializing of who we are."

But even if you are a bit too attached to that slab of metal in your pocket or purse, that doesn't mean you need to stop using it cold turkey, Roberts says.

"We can just cut back. Have some times during the day when we're free from cellphones," he said. "Set boundaries, like digital-free family dinners, or no phones after a certain time of day. Don't sleep with your phone. Don't take it into the car; put it in the trunk.

"Start out with the one behavior that will provide the biggest benefit. That's the best thing you can do because it wrests the power away from the cellphone and into your hands."

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