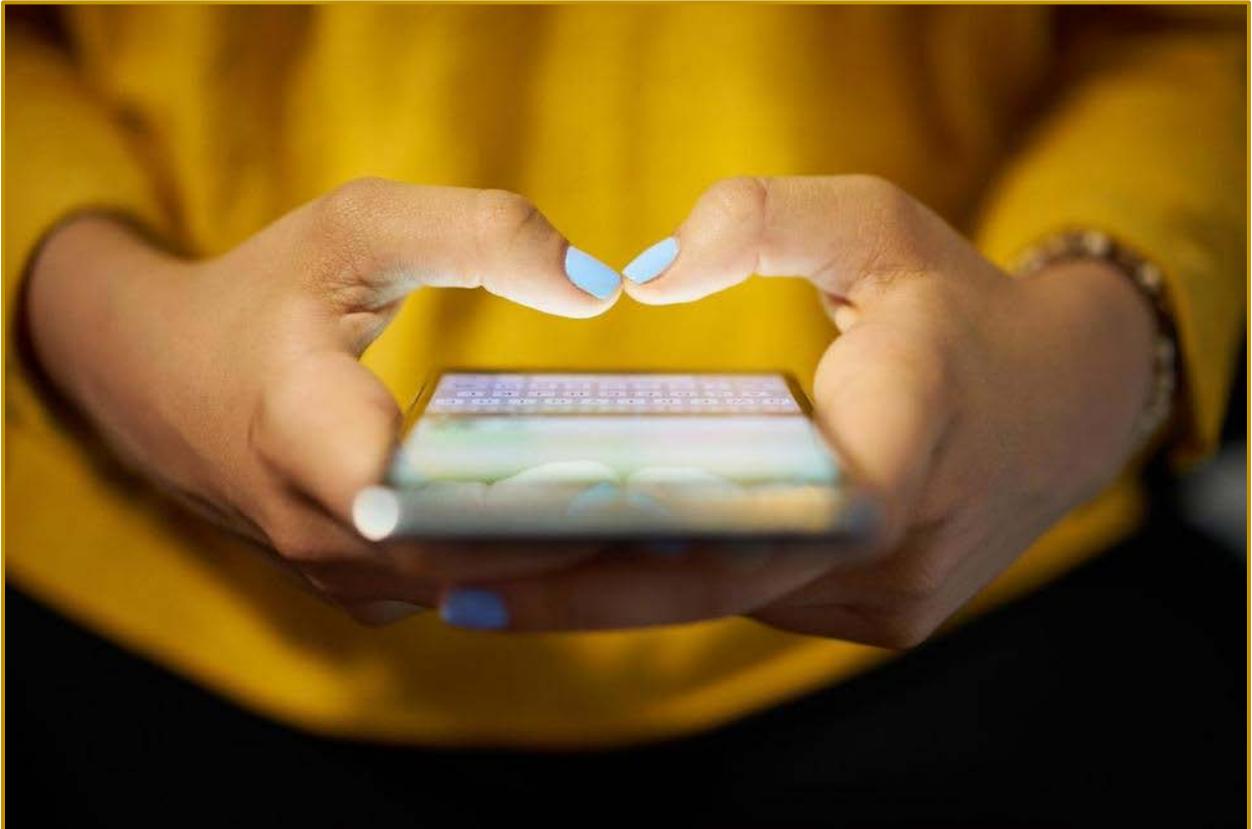


How Your Smartphone May Be Making You Unhappy

Our phones connect us electronically but could be degrading our personal connections.

By [Ruben Castaneda](#), Staff Writer | Feb. 12, 2018, at 11:34 a.m.



While the impact of smartphone distraction is particularly widespread among teenagers, an increasing number of couples are dealing with the issue as well. (Getty Images)

Have you ever pulled out your smartphone to check an incoming text during a family dinner? Scrolled through your emails late at night while lying in bed next to your spouse? Interrupted a coffee date to see who's responded to your latest tweet or Instagram post?

If you own a smartphone – and 77 percent of adults in the U.S. have one, according to a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center – chances are you've at some point diverted your attention away from someone you were spending time with in favor of your electronic device. That kind of behavior is undermining the enjoyment of [face-to-face social interaction](#), according to research published in November 2017 in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. In one study, researchers had more than 300 people share a meal at a restaurant with friends and family members; participants were randomly

assigned to keep their phones with them, on the table or to put them away. "When phones were present (versus absent), participants felt more distracted, which reduced how much they enjoyed spending time with their friends/family," researchers wrote.

The study is part of a raft of research in recent years that suggests that for many people, the prodigious use of [mobile devices](#) is eroding their connections with family members, friends and romantic partners. The diminution of these ties in turn can contribute to [a sense of isolation](#). For example, a study published in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior* in 2016 concluded that "how individuals use cellphones in the presence of a romantic partner impacts the partner's satisfaction with their relationship, which in turn can negatively impact their well-being." Blending the meanings of the words "phone" and "snubbed," researchers used the term "phubbed" to describe being snubbed by someone who's using his or her cellphone in your presence.

"We may be in the same room and space, but it's like being alone together" when you're spending time with someone who checks his or her smartphone rather than engaging face-to-face, says James Roberts, a professor of marketing at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and co-author of the 2016 study. "It creates conflict. Our phones are distracting us from the relationships that are most important to us, our romantic relationships." Research suggests that even [strangers](#) don't like it when someone "phubs" them by looking at their phone instead of trying to engage, Roberts says.

A growing number of couples have issues around smartphone distractions, says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a psychotherapist who practices in the District of Columbia and suburban Maryland. "During counseling sessions, I've had couples come in, and one of them gets a text and can't stop himself or herself from checking it," Gadhia-Smith says. "The other half of the couple gets annoyed. In intimate relationships, you want to feel the person is fully present. You don't want to feel they're partly with you and partly elsewhere."

The impact of [smartphone distraction is particularly acute among teenagers](#), says Caroline Fenkel, a licensed clinical social worker with Newport Academy, which runs treatment centers in Connecticut and California for teenagers struggling with mental health issues, eating disorders and substance use disorder. "We see this a lot with our [patients]," Fenkel says. "Teens' intense focus on cellphones distracts them from living in the moment." Fenkel, 29, says that when she was a teenager, she wanted to be out with her friends all the time, going to parties or hanging out at the mall. "Now, parents tell us they have to force their kids to go out because they're glued to their cellphones," she says.

This imbalance can have profound consequences for young people, says Sister Ilia Delio, who serves as the Josephine C. Connelly endowed chair in theology at Villanova University. Over-reliance on a smartphone can lead to "distraction, lack of attention, an increase in narcissism and ... an increase in loneliness," she says.

It's impossible to fully escape the ubiquity of cellphones, but they don't have to degrade your interactions with people. Experts recommend these five strategies to prevent smartphones from corroding your face-to-face exchanges:

Limit the time you spend checking your texts, emails and various alerts. Unless you need to constantly monitor your smartphone for work – for example, as a public safety official or an [emergency room doctor](#) – chances are you don't have to your cellphone, says Jonathan Alpert, a psychotherapist in New York City. Designate three times a day – in the morning, afternoon and evening – to check and respond to texts, emails, tweets and other social media messages, Alpert says. "Turn off your notifications and alerts so you don't feel compelled to whip out your phone and respond every time someone gives you a like on Facebook," he advises.

Make a point of going out to see people face-to-face. Go to at least one group gathering a week, where you see and talk to friends in person, Gadhia-Smith says. The gathering could be a book club, sports activity, chess group or spiritual community. In addition to your regular weekly group activity, always be on the lookout for other opportunities to [socialize with new people](#). You can find Meetup groups in your area that engage in an activity that interests you. "Continue to expand your social connections," she says.

Call a "tech timeout" during family dinners. Designate the family dinner hour to be a smartphone-free time, Fenkel says. This works for couples without kids, too. "Implement a tech timeout during dinner each night so you can have a conversation about the day without the distraction of a cellphone getting in the way," she says.

Keep your smartphone out of the bedroom late at night. Responding to texts and emails or checking who responded to you on Twitter while lying in bed late at night isn't a good way to stay connected to your spouse or significant other, who'd prefer you pay attention to him or her rather than your cellphone, Alpert says. Research has linked the blue light produced by electronic devices to [sleeping problems](#), which can affect your mental health, he notes. Some studies also suggest exposure to electronic device light could be linked to some kinds of cancer, depression, [diabetes](#), [heart disease](#) and obesity.

Designate a weekly cellphone moratorium. Pick a day and time to put away your cellphone and engage in an activity in which you interact in person with family members, a significant other or friends, Fenkel says. Activities could include going out for a meal, spending time at an amusement park, [volunteering](#) or visiting the zoo. This will help strengthen ties and fight social isolation.