



# How to stop your smartphone from ruling your life

## A guide from Life Squared

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### Introduction

Have you become hooked on your smartphone? Do you glance at it whenever you have a moment of unoccupied time - or even when you're in the middle of something else? Do you check it as soon as you wake up?

If so, you're not alone. Smartphones have become central to our lives. Four out of five adults in the UK now own one. They have also changed the way we spend our time and even the way we behave. For example, in the UK we look at our smartphones more than a billion times a day. The level to which they have shifted our behaviour and absorbed our time seems remarkable given that they only became available in their current form in the early 2000's.

Like the introduction of most other technologies, the rise of the smartphone has brought both advantages and disadvantages. They have improved communication and enabled new industries to emerge, but they have also proved to have a limitless capacity to absorb our attention and concentration, which could have some problematic consequences for us.

### Our addiction to smartphones

Evidence is building about our near-addiction to smartphones. This week, consultancy firm Deloitte [published a report](#) analysing the mobile phone habits of more than 4,000 UK consumers. It came up with some interesting figures, including:

- Over 50% of people check their smartphone within 15 minutes of waking up

- Half of all 18–24 year olds check their phone in the middle of the night
- Experts suggest that light from smartphone (and other) screens can inhibit the process of falling asleep, and should be turned off at least an hour before turning out the lights. But less than a quarter of smartphone owners leave a sufficient interval.

In [speaking to the BBC](#) about the report, a Deloitte spokesperson suggested that our current overuse of smartphones was a temporary phenomenon, as when a new technology emerges “we tend to overreact to it.”. It seems reasonable to suggest that the novelty and gradual take-up of new technology can lead to a peak and then levelling-out in its use, and this probably applies to the physical device we call a smartphone, as technology moves on and no doubt other devices will emerge which take over from it.

But, the important point is not about the physical product - it is that smartphones have carved out a new role for a piece of technology in our lives that seems here to stay, and may well increase further. So we may have reached ‘peak smartphone’ as the report argues, but we may not have reached ‘peak smartphone use’ in our own lives, and this presents us with a challenge.

### **What’s the problem?**

Our challenge now is to work out how to manage the role of such devices within our lives, and so far many of us have not been very good at doing this.

We’re not just talking here about the obvious dangers to our health of getting distracted by the use of smartphones, even though this is a major concern in itself - for example, research by road safety charity Brake found that around half of drivers aged between 25 and 34 are taking huge risks by (illegally) texting, using apps or going online on their mobiles when they are behind the wheel.

The problems we’ll focus on here are the broader issues of how smartphones absorb our attention, occupy our head space and change our behaviour.

#### **a. We crave stimulation**

If you look around a train carriage, waiting room, airport or any other place where people are sitting without a specific purpose, you are likely to find most of them looking at their smartphones. Whether emailing, playing, watching or messaging, they will be absorbed in a screen, rather than embracing the opportunity for a pause in giving their attention to something.

As soon as there is a second where we are not occupied or stimulated by things in the ‘real world’ we seem to instantly reach for our smartphones. This may now be out of habit rather than anything else, but it may have originally emerged out of a fear of boredom or a need to be constantly entertained or stimulated. Either way, this seems unlikely to be good for us as we’re starting to crave constant stimulation in our lives - even if the stimulation has no value or real benefit to us whatsoever. To put it crudely, it’s as if we’re a group of mindless animals who are only happy when something sparkly is being waved in our faces.

By habitually seeking stimulation and distraction through our smartphones, we are missing out on the important opportunity to unplug ourselves from the world, give our brains a rest and actually

have some peace and quiet. Sometimes it's good to sit quietly, stare out of the window and, yes, even be bored for a bit.

#### **b. We're disconnected from the real world**

Our absorption in smartphones can disengage us from the real world. This is part of a much broader issue surrounding the development of digital and virtual technology but it still stands as a concern, as the reality around us is the thing we actually need to live in and look after, and becoming too immersed in a world of distraction and fantasy could make us less concerned about valuing things in the real world - including our relationships, environment and direction of our own lives.

#### **c. We're taking our attention away from each other**

This point is connected to the previous one but it is worth exploring further. Many people choose to engage with their smartphones rather than engaging with each other, even when they are face-to-face with them (for example, checking their phone in the middle of a conversation). In other words, the smartphone 'trumps' our attention above the people in front of us.

This might seem harmless enough if both parties are happy with that situation, but it can cause problems - first, it can exacerbate our habit of failing to pay proper attention to people or be involved in activities. Second, at the very least it shows a lack of respect for other people - an important value in building a civilised society.

Third, in a lot of cases at least one party is missing out on the other's full attention and may be unhappy with it or this may be causing a problem. This may apply to a range of situations, including families, education, friendships and relationships. As the Deloitte report notes, "A third of all 18–24 year olds noted that their excessive use of smartphones had caused disagreements with their partners (see Figure 7). For 25–34 year olds the proportion was even higher, at 38 per cent."

This is a particularly important point for us when we occupy certain roles, and the most obvious of these is as parents. If we are immersed in checking our smartphones rather than engaging with our children (which, anecdotal evidence suggests, happens a great deal), then are we at risk of neglecting their needs for encouragement and full attention, to help them develop into loved, confident, attentive adults?

#### **d. We're absorbed in even more complexity and choice**

The use of smartphones presents us and our minds with a vast array of new messages, information and pressures. We can become absorbed in even greater levels of complexity and choice than we already have in the modern world. And, with even greater levels of distraction, smartphones can make it even harder for us to gain perspective on our lives - to see and prioritise the things that really matter in life.

#### **e. We're being poor role models for children**

If we spend much of our time as parents habitually using smartphones when we could be engaging with other people and the real world, does this set a good example to our kids of how to regulate their use of smartphones?

### **A smarter approach to smartphones**

So, we've explored our growing addiction to smartphones and some of the problems this could be creating for us. We now need to ask what we can do about it. As the question posed earlier - how can we manage the role of these devices in our lives, so that we get the most out of them, without letting them control our lives?

As time goes on and we reflect on the use of our new technology, we're likely to emerge with a range of formal and informal ways of regulating our behaviour, and rules for how we use smartphones.

To contribute to this conversation, we've set out below some suggested steps we can each take to adopt a 'smarter approach to smartphones'. These include some suggestions for 'smartphone etiquette' to help us ensure our smartphone use doesn't trample on our relationships with other people. Here are a few possible points we could follow:

1. **Be aware of your habits** - first, be aware when you are automatically reaching for your smartphone, whenever it may be. Also be aware of the impulse that's making you do this. Is it boredom? Force of habit? Or a genuine need - e.g. to call someone? Simply identifying when you're doing it and being aware of the reasons why is the first step to managing your use better.
2. **Ask yourself - do you really need to use it?** - once you've identified why you want to use your smartphone, you can then decide whether you should. Do you really need to use it or can it wait - are you just turning to it out of habit? Could you engage with the real world, read a book, do something creative, have some down time or talk to people in front of you instead? If you do need to use it of course then do so! This point is not about completely restricting the use or fun you get from your smartphone, but about trying to control habitual impulses and realise you have a choice, and that there may be better things to spend your brain's time on.
3. **Embrace the joy of boredom and silence** - enjoy the feeling of not having anything to do for a few seconds. Enjoy some mindful time - don't just pick up your phone to keep your head filled with a stream of sparkly distraction.
4. **Have a rule to prioritise real conversations above digital ones** - engage properly with the people in front of you and give them your full attention. Don't pick up your phone during your conversations with them, unless it is a vital call.
5. **Balance your smartphone time with perspective time** - as smartphones have taken up more time, we've not balanced this out with more activities that give us perspective and connect us to the real world. Try seeking more time on these activities too - from walking in nature through to creative, immersive tasks like drawing.
6. **Keep smartphones out of the bedroom!** - you can have a rule to turn them off when you go to bed, or not check them when you're in bed - but the best solution of all is to keep them out of the bedroom altogether. Many people have the same rule in keeping televisions out of the bedroom.
7. **If you have children, set them a good example** - try to be disciplined in your use of the smartphone. Perhaps follow the rules set out here and encourage them to follow them too.
8. **Have rules for different functions** - part of the appeal of smartphones is that they are multi-functional, so beyond the basic rules above, perhaps it makes sense to have different rules for different functions of the phone:

- Telephone - we are generally used to dealing with this function, so perhaps it needs no further recommendations.
- Email - give yourself a specific amount of time (say 20 minutes) at a couple of points each day to check and respond to your emails, but don't log in outside this. See our guide 'How to avoid the email trap' for more ideas on this point.
- Messaging - this can be one of the main functions that pulls people into checking their smartphone, as they become slaves to the 'ping' of a new message arriving - even if it is just part of an old conversation and not meant specifically for them. To manage this, either try to avoid using messaging accounts entirely, or disable the sound or vibration notifications of new messages on your phone so that they distract you less.
- Entertainment - view the smartphone like any other screen - allow yourself a limited time to watch it (if you want to) each day. You wouldn't (we hope) spend all day watching your TV screen, so try to manage your time on the little screen too!

### **Over to you!**

These are just some initial ideas. We'd love to hear your suggestions on how we can manage our smartphone use in daily life. Do send your ideas to [info@lifesquared.org.uk](mailto:info@lifesquared.org.uk) and we'll publish the best ones on our website!

[www.lifesquared.org.uk](http://www.lifesquared.org.uk)

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### **Links**

<http://www.deloitte.co.uk/mobileUK/assets/pdf/Deloitte-Mobile-Consumer-2016-There-is-no-place-like-phone.pdf>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-37468560>

<http://www.brake.org.uk/media-centre/1599-it-s-never-clever-to-use-a-smartphone-while-driving>

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