

Microprocessing

How Mindless Phone Use Ruins Your Relationships

Whether you're at work, on a date, or with the family, put that thing away every now and then



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Think back to the last time you met up with a friend for dinner. How many times did you look at your phone during the meal? Chances are, you checked it at least once, if not more often, without even



really thinking about it. How could you resist when you're bombarded with notifications by a piece of technology precisely engineered to seize and hold your attention?

Checking a text or posting on Instagram when you're in a real-life social situation may seem harmless, but studies have shown that it isn't—not for you and not for the person you're with. From office one-on-ones to dinner dates, interacting with your phone in the presence of another person can leave a lasting negative impression that affects how much you enjoy your time together or even how that person perceives your relationship overall.

According to Gallup's most recent poll on the subject, Americans typically check their smartphones at least once an hour. Meanwhile, 81% report having their phones near them “almost all the time during waking hours,” and 41% actively check their phones several times per hour.

Still, most Americans also think they use their phone less than others around them—61%, in fact, which, as the Gallup poll points out, is a mathematical impossibility. (I will freely admit to belonging to the 11% of polled users who believe they use their phone more than others.)

Kosta Kushlev, an assistant professor of psychology at Georgetown University, says he became interested in the distracting nature of phone use in social situations because of his own bad habits. Motivated by this observation, Kushlev decided to study the phenomenon. A resulting 2017 study showed that if a subject in a social setting has their phone on the table in front of them—even if they're not actively using it—they leave that social situation having enjoyed it less than subjects who didn't have their phones near them. The effects are subtle, Kushlev says, which makes them harder for the subject to perceive.

And it isn't that the presence of the phone is making people unhappy. Rather, phones are “leading you to miss out on opportunities that you might have otherwise had,” Kushlev says. “You can't really pick up exactly from where you left off. It's interrupted.”

Kushlev performed a similar study in 2017 that looked at 174 millennial subjects over the course of a week, rather than a single meal, and found that people reported feeling less connected and generally

worse after interactions that included the presence of “computer-mediated communication” than after purely face-to-face, no-phone interactions.

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Another study, from 2018, looked at the impact of smartphones’ presence on interactions between strangers. It found that strangers smiled at each other less, and smiled less intensely, when they had their smartphones with them than when they didn’t.

“People just don’t feel that the person is paying attention to them, and then they report having a [worse] conversation,” says John Hunter, a PhD candidate in psychological science at the University of California, Irvine, who conducted the smiling study with Kushlev and others. Even if your phone is not in use but still in front of you, “that makes the conversation worse, because the other person kind of feels that, well, that phone in front of you is maybe more important to you than the conversation we’re having.”

These effects aren’t felt only between friends or strangers. In workplaces and romantic relationships, the impact of “phubbing” (that is, phone snubbing) can have distinct ripple effects. A 2017 study looked at how “boss phubbing” affects employee engagement and found that when bosses phub their subordinates, employees have lower trust, less belief that their work is meaningful, and lower levels of confidence in their professional abilities. All of this leads to less employee engagement overall.

The impact on romantic relationships is similar. The same team who ran the workplace phubbing study also conducted research on phubbing among couples and found similar results: When one member of a couple uses their phone in the presence of the other, the result is conflict that lowers relationship satisfaction, which can then lead to lower overall life satisfaction and, in some cases, depression.

“It makes your partner feel like you don’t care about them,” says study co-author Meredith David, an assistant professor of marketing at Baylor

University. “[It] makes your partner start questioning, ‘What is this person doing? They don’t care to talk to me. They don’t value our relationship. They’re not really here with me.’”

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Phubbing can have damaging effects on parent-child relationships, too. Kushlev performed a study that looked at how parents experience a day at the museum when they are allowed to just barely use their phones versus when they’re encouraged to use their phones as much as possible. The study found that parents who used their phones more reported being in a worse mood, feeling less social connection, and feeling less “meaning”—which Kushlev says is particularly remarkable.

“When parents use their phones, they might be missing out on opportunities to connect with their children and feel a major benefit of being with their children, which is a sense of greater meaning in life,” he says.

David notes that merely having the phone on the table and not in use makes people feel less valued. She recommends that in meetings or on dates, participants turn off their phones and put them away to avoid any additional conflict that may arise from phubbing. She also predicts that workplaces will start implementing “phone breaks,” similar to smoking breaks, in which all employees are allowed to use their phones only during designated times and/or in designated places.

While most of the research shows that having your phone out in social situations won’t do you any good, there may be one notable exception: when you’re feeling anxious. Hunter led a study that looked at the stress response of those with phones out and in use, those with phones but not in use, and those without phones, all in socially awkward situations. He found that the least anxious group was the one in which participants had their phones but weren’t using them.

It’s all about the value that the phone can bring in a particular situation. “Use your phone for enhancement, not for escape,” Hunter says. “If you’re using your phone in ways to make the conversation

better, you're sharing a funny joke with someone... that's good. But when you do it to escape, it tends to be pretty negative.”

In some ways, a phone can feel like another person in the room, taking up cognitive space with communications from text messages, social media notifications, and news alerts. But a phone is also easy to put away. It's easy to put into airplane mode, silence the notifications—or even turn it off completely.

Smartphones aren't going anywhere—and unlike human beings, they don't have feelings. If we want to keep our relationships with our romantic partners, friends, and co-workers healthy, we need to prioritize their physical presence over digital communications when we're together. That text message is still going to be there when you're done.

