

# The Digital Drug: Understanding and Treating Mobile Phone Addiction

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## INTRODUCTION

Do we need all this technology? There are 6.8 billion mobile subscriptions worldwide estimates by The International Telecommunication Union (Sanou, 2013). That is equivalent to 96 percent of the world population (out of 7.1 billion according to the ITU). What is the impact of being accessible twenty-four hours a day, every day? This chapter overviews the psychological and social impact of mobile phone use and the potential for addiction. Similar to Internet addiction, the symptoms associated with mobile phone addiction, the risk factors, and overall the impact on our mental health and personal well-being. This chapter explores new trends in treating this problem using the model developed by the first hospital in the U.S. to provide inpatient recovery for Internet and mobile phone addiction. Finally, this chapter explores other behavioral trends in this new and constantly evolving field that impacts almost every aspect of our lives, from home to work to school, and important implications of this technology for the future.

## OVERVIEW

Internet addiction was first identified in the 1990s in the US. Since then, we have gained significant insight through research on the symptoms associated with Internet addiction, the risk factors, the subtypes, and early outcome studies have investigated treatments best suited for recovery. The research has also expanded to countries such as China, Italy, Germany, Korea, Taiwan, and the UK

investigating Internet and now mobile phone addiction. The DSM-5 also includes Internet Gaming Addiction in Section 3 as an emerging diagnosis.

With the mobile revolution, new nuances of Internet addiction have formed such as Nomophobia, a term created by British researchers in 2008 to identify people who experience anxiety when they have no access to mobile technology. We have moved beyond traditional notions of Internet addiction and given rise to new problems about being away from our technology. We live and need this technology for many functional reasons such as shopping, making airline reservations, making hotel reservations, and staying connected. What happens when this becomes too much connectivity and health problems arise?

This chapter explores the explosion in mobile devices and their impact on behavior. Specifically, the chapter reviews the signs of mobile phone addiction and how to tell if you spend too much time using mobile technology. In the post-mobile era, it is hard to tell if you suffer from a problem. This gives you guidelines on signs of mobile phone addiction. So what if you are addicted to your phone, what problems does this cause? The issue of mobile technology is here to stay. We will not get away from it. As technology grows and becomes more ubiquitous, this chapter reviews the impact to us as a culture and society. It reviews the risk factors associated with developing mobile phone addiction and the consequences caused by it. To help manage all of this technology, the chapter reviews personal strategies to use to better control use of mobile technologies so that consumers do not feel so consumed by their use. Most important for therapists and clinicians, this chapter outlines

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new approaches to treating mobile phone addiction from a therapy perspective. Finally, as technology has grown by leaps and bounds over the last few years, this chapter reviews the future implications of this technology on the next generation of digital consumers.

## SIGNS OF MOBILE PHONE ADDICTION

Mobile phone technology and use has grown substantially over the last few years. Time magazine's Techland section conducted a massive, fascinating international poll of 5,000 Americans, Britons, South Koreans, Chinese, Indians, South Africans, Indonesians, and Brazilians, and found -- quite unsurprisingly if you have been following smartphone addiction stats -- that everyone in the entire world is unable to simply leave their phone in their pockets. The Time survey paints an unmistakable portrait of a world collectively staring at a tiny display screen for hours and hours of every day. Among the incredible evidence of our impending cybernetic future from the piece:

- 84 percent of respondents said that they could not go a single day without their cellphones.
- 50 percent of Americans sleep with their phone next to them like a teddy bear or a spouse, a number that includes more than 80 percent of 18-24 year olds.
- 20 percent of respondents check their phone every 10 minutes.
- 24 percent said they had used text messages to set up a rendezvous with someone they were having an affair with, a number that includes 56 percent of Chinese respondents.

You can read more of these stats and shake your head at the extent to which we have become addicted to our smartphones on the Time website.

Now, Time's thesis that we have become ever-dependent on and attached to our smartphones is nothing groundbreaking: Seemingly every week an eyebrow-raising new study or survey or national poll comes out cataloguing humanity's inability to not check its smartphone while at the dinner table, at least in the developed world. We appear totally, hopelessly addicted, so much so that there is now even a term for a fear of losing one's phone: nomophobia, a trend that we will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

Surveys show to the extreme, people check their smartphones while sitting on the toilet and that these devices are ruining people's vacations and social relationships because they can't put them down. With so much reliance on smartphones and any type of screen device, how can we tell when someone suffers from an addiction?

As a new field, healthcare practitioners are unfamiliar with how to approach assessment and treatment of clients who suffer from addictions to mobile technology and devices. Often, practitioners may not screen for such a problem or misdiagnose a client who is also suffering from other co-morbid psychiatric conditions.

Screening for mobile phone addiction and Internet addiction is the most important first step that a clinician can take. One aspect of screening for mobile phone addiction involves assessing Internet time in general and secondly, use of mobile and laptop devices.

So how would you decide if your attachment to your cell phone is an addiction or perfectly normal behavior? Atchley and Warden (2012) suggested applying standard definitions of addictions to cell phone usage:

- Tolerance (decreased value requiring more use to get the same effect);
- Withdrawal (symptoms is you don't have access to your addiction);
- Increased use;
- Inability to cut back on use;
- Reduction of competing behaviors;

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