

## For phone time, what's normal?

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Credit: Peter Griffin/Public Domain

It's come to this. Almost every night, the same fight about my significant other's persistent smartphone use.

Of course, plenty of millennial couples, likely many Gen-X pairs, too, know this spat all too well. One innocently ignores the other because the person's head is utterly consumed by the 5- or 6-inch screen in front of his or her face. For some, the only thing that keeps this I-can't-believe-

you're-glued-to-your-phone-right-now battle from turning into a war is that both parties are often guilty as charged at various points during the day.

In fact, in a 2015 Harris Poll, more Americans said they could live without caffeine than said they could live without their mobile phones. Millennials (18- to 34-year-olds), in particular, just can't seem to help themselves. One in three hates how much time they spend on their smartphones, according to a 2016 Coupofy survey on smartphone user behavior. Yet 85 percent admit to carting their phones to the can.

What's more, these always-connected tendencies have trickled down to our kids. Fully 40 percent of Gen Z (13- to 18-year-olds), or iGen as the generation is sometimes called, self-identified as digital device addicts in a recent study conducted by market research firm CivicScience.

So, the question is, how much phone time is too much?

"I think each person has to create that line for themselves," said Tayana Panova, a researcher who has studied the [mental health](#) outcomes associated with phone and internet use.

Technically speaking, your phone time crosses over into the dysfunctional realm when you prioritize the device over activities (especially social ones); get emotionally attached to the inanimate object; or seek comfort from it. In her research for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Panova found a direct link - or a "strong negative association" - between mobile phone use or internet use for coping during emotionally taxing situations and mental health.

In other words, it's not healthy to use your phone as an avoidance strategy. On the other hand, what about turning to your smartphone to fight off boredom? That's relatively harmless. According to Panova's

research, there is no correlation between this type of behavior and mental health.

Quality of life is a separate matter altogether.

"My wife and I made an agreement that the phone doesn't come into the bedroom," said Stephen Moye, who lives with his wife and 17-year-old son in the San Diego area.

Instead, he's allowed to keep an Amazon tablet by the bed to satiate his nighttime and early-morning internet cravings, though the device is not configured to fetch his email. To the vexation of his wife, who is a light sleeper, Moye used to respond to work emails at all hours. He works in the mortgage business and feels compelled to check the bond market regularly, keep up on news, listen to podcasts, participate on social media and stay on top of client communication.

With the phone in another room at night and a new job that came with more forgiving expectations, Moye believes he's improving when it comes to moderating his smartphone usage.

"Have I always balanced it? No," he said. "But I'm getting better."

His son, however, is on his phone all the time and it's become problematic. The teenager is relatively typical for his age in that he uses the phone to Snapchat, Instagram, Kik and participate in other modes of text or photo-based communication. But the boy has occasionally been forced to delete social media posts that were in poor taste, and there's been several family discussions on the topic of excessive phone use.

Is there a double standard in place?

"I can at least justify my behavior, because a lot of it is business related,"

Moye said. "Where with him, he's not bringing any dough to the party."

But, with iGen, there is also cause for concern that phone time is affecting development.

"We're still trying to figure out the impact (of phone use) on the brain at this age," said Dr. Jean Twenge, author of "Generation Me," and a San Diego State psychology researcher studying how smartphones are impacting various aspects of our lives. "We know from other areas of research, that the brain is more malleable during childhood and adolescence."

Twenge also referred to a 2014 field experiment, approved by the UCLA Institutional Review, that found that sixth-graders who attended a five-day camp with absolutely no screens - TV, phone or otherwise - showed significant improvement in their ability to accurately interpret nonverbal emotional cues in a post-experiment test. A control group of students, meanwhile, carried on as usual and demonstrated no change in emotion-reading abilities.

"In the beginning, many (kids) moaned in diaries I asked them to keep about no media. By the end, most exclaimed, 'I love being without it!'" said Yalda Uhls, study author and UCLA researcher.

Uhls, author of "Media Moms & Digital Dads: A Fact, Not Fear Approach to Parenting in the Digital Age," said she was prompted to conduct the experiment after watching her tween daughter and daughter's friends communicate through their screens. She hopes her work will serve as a call to action for more research on how digital media affect children's social development.

"Our study suggests that skills in reading human emotion may be diminished when children's face-to-face interaction is displaced by

technologically mediated communication," Uhls wrote in her report.

That might be alarming when you consider Common Sense Media's findings that, on any given day, American teenagers average six hours and 40 minutes of screen media use. Tweens (8- to 12-year-olds), meanwhile, average about four-and-a-half hours' worth of screen time daily.

"In general, it follows logically that if teens are spending that much time with screens, there's less time for other things," Twenge said.

Parents are, in part, to blame.

"I'm always wondering ... am I modeling something that I don't want my kids to emulate?" said Adam McLane, who runs a youth ministry organization called Youth Cartel.

McLane admits to spending so much time on his phone that his children (5, 13 and 15) regularly tell him to put his phone away. The San Diego resident, who works from home, says he's stuck in an infinite loop of checking his phone for [social media](#) updates and email. Like many of us, McLane even confesses to responding to texts while stopped at red lights, keeping his bed by the phone and sneaking peaks at church.

"I'm so used to being stimulated all the time that if I'm not stimulated, I reach for my phone," he said.

There is a generational argument to be made in defense of our phone-preoccupied society. It goes something like this: The phone is the new TV set.

But even my significant other, who argues this very point whenever our phone-time disagreement resurfaces, recognizes the holes in this line of

thinking. Unlike the TV, the phone can get off the couch with you and creep into other areas where it becomes harder to separate mindless distraction from social interaction.

Or, as he put it, now we're totally vegging out in very public places.

Maybe, then, excessive use is normal by our society's quickly evolving standards on phone time.

"Normal (phone) use ... is so high now that I think it is potentially unhealthy," Twenge said.

Healthy or not, we seem to be in denial about the affects of our screen time. Case in point: Some 67 percent of millennials believe technology positively affects their relationships and enhances their social lives, according to the aforementioned Harris Poll. Yet, 46 percent of millennials also say their friends and family think they use technology too much.

Cue the new lovers' quarrel.

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