

Worried you're spending too much time on your phone? Study seeks to answer this complex question

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Look around and it's clear that people have become devoted to digital technologies such as mobile phones. Whether its Facebook, Instagram or any of the myriad other platforms available today, many are concerned that they or their loved ones are spending too much time online.

An international research team from the University of Melbourne, Stanford University and University College London has been studying a hitherto mostly unrecognized driver of technology use, finding that people are using [digital technology](#) to manage their emotions.

This is called "[emotion regulation](#)," and it is essential to well-being. But there are limitations to digital emotion regulation, and if it gets out of hand—becoming the main strategy we use—we may need to find healthier ways of dealing with emotions. The team's paper "Digital Emotion Regulation in Everyday Life" was published on 29 April 2022 in the *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*.

University of Melbourne researcher Dr. Greg Wadley says [digital devices](#) are being increasingly used to manage emotions such as stress, anxiety, boredom and the need for social connectedness.

"Although emotions are essential to help us navigate the ever-changing, complex and challenging situations we face in [everyday life](#), sometimes people experience emotions they prefer not to have," Dr. Wadley said.

"When this happens, we may try to change the emotion to one that feels better, or more suited to the current context. For example, people may increase their anger to prepare for competition, or suppress joy to focus on work. People also help each other manage emotions by sharing good news or providing reassurance after an emotional encounter."

Psychologists have catalogued many ways that people manage emotion, as diverse as reappraising a situation, doing exercise, practicing self-compassion, and seeking distraction. But recent research shows that increasingly, people are turning to [digital tools](#) and strategies to manage emotion.

"The pandemic lockdowns led people to do relatively more digital

regulation. We have found that up to half of phone use may be for emotion regulation. Looking to the future, emerging technologies may offer more powerful forms of emotion regulation," Dr. Wadley said.

The researchers argue that society could benefit from a better understanding of the complex relationship between emotion and technology use.

"Obsessive technology use can represent repeated attempts at regulating negative emotion. A common response to over-use is to restrict access to the technology, for example, through limits on screen-time. But when someone uses an emotion-regulation strategy too much, or the strategy is ineffective, the solution is not abstinence, but to use a better strategy," Dr. Wadley said.

"Attempts to mitigate technology over-use should include education about alternative, healthy ways to manage emotion. There are excellent resources that teach healthy emotion regulation skills, providing alternatives for people who want to spend less time on their device.

"For most people, [digital technologies](#) offer benefits, including convenient ways to deal with the inevitable emotional ups and downs of daily life. Researchers in Europe recently proposed that digital skills education should include 'digital emotional intelligence.' We agree this is the right way forward."

More information: Wally Smith et al, Digital Emotion Regulation in Everyday Life, *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (2022). [DOI: 10.1145/3491102.3517573](https://doi.org/10.1145/3491102.3517573)

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