

When did I realise I had a problem? Was it when the therapist shouted at me for trying to sneak my iPhone into a “relaxing” massage? Or was it the night I didn’t sleep until 2am because I was determined to pass level 296 on Candy Crush? Or that time my date texted me from across the table to ask me to stop looking at my phone during dinner?

My name is Hannah Bass and I’m a smartphone addict. And I’m not alone. Last month, a poll conducted by YouGov and the Huffington Post found that nearly a third of smartphone users described themselves as “addicted,” with numbers highest among women.

While obsessive smartphone use is not yet formally recognised as a disorder, psychiatrists in Singapore recently made headlines with their push for classification. The evidence is growing: Another recent study, published in the *Journal of Behavioural Addictions*, studied the phone usage of college students aged 19-22 at a university in Texas. The results were astounding: women once again out-teched the men, spending a whopping ten hours a day on their phones (150 minutes more on average than the men surveyed).

The stats aren’t much better once you’re out of college: A survey by the Centre for Creative Leadership found that 60 percent of smartphone-using professionals were in touch with work for an average 13.5 hours a day, with an extra five hours over the weekend.

Fenella, 27, a management consultant living in Dubai, found herself almost surgically attached to her work

Phone Jenga: First person to check a text buys dinner!

Should You Unplug Your Life?

They’re the first thing we check on in the morning and the last thing we think about at night. Yup, I’m talking about our phones. With the UAE ranking top for global smartphone usage, they’re a fact of life—and usually a useful one. But when our addiction to social connectivity starts making us anti-social, is it time to switch off?

By Hannah Bass

BlackBerry while working on a project for a client overseas. “I’d wake up and before my eyes had even opened properly, the first thing I’d do would be check my work email,” she remembers. “The guy I was dating actually banned me from looking at my BlackBerry while we were together, and I couldn’t even stick to the ban. I knew it was antisocial but I just couldn’t stop. It really did feel like an addiction.”

“Like many people, my job comes with the pressure to be permanently attached to my phone,” Fenella explains. “There’s an expectation that I should be able to respond at any time of the day or night. It makes me feel like I’m constantly mentally plugged into work, which really isn’t healthy, but at the same time I also get a buzz from being so connected. The ping of my BlackBerry has become validating, almost like a high.”

HOOKED ON iHIGHS

In fact, scientists have found that our brains experience phone updates in the same way as a physical high. Receiving a text, Tweet or Facebook notification produces a hit of dopamine, stimulating the same pleasure centre in our brains affected by highly addictive narcotics. “These rewards serve as jolts of energy that recharge the compulsion engine, much like the frisson a gambler receives as a new card hits the table,” Judith Donath, Ph.D., a media scholar at MIT, told *Scientific American*. “Cumulatively, the effect is potent and hard to resist”—which explains why we compulsively check our phones, chasing our next fix.

The irony is, this hyper-



“Phubbing”: snubbing your friends in favour of your phone. Look familiar?

connectivity isn’t even helping us to smash it at work. Gloria Mark, a professor at the University of California-Irvine, conducted a study into the disruption caused by work email and found that today’s office workers can, on average, only focus on a single task for three minutes before they’re interrupted. Meanwhile, researchers at Stanford University have found that multitaskers are far worse at filtering out irrelevant information and even switching between tasks than people who concentrate on a single job in hand. Social media—accessible at the swipe of a finger on our phones—has also been shown by numerous studies to be capable of shortening our attention spans, and frequent texting can even, according to a study by the University of Calgary, damage our ability to interpret

unfamiliar words. I tried to keep track of how many times I checked my phone while writing this article but lost count somewhere around 57—is it any wonder we’re finding it harder to concentrate?

We’re not just distracted at work, either—when was the last time you settled down to enjoy a movie or concentrate on a good book without the temptation to check your phone? In a 2013 UK study of 12,000 people, researchers found that 35 percent of screen time was devoured by a trend dubbed “multiscreening”—watching TV while simultaneously using a phone or tablet. And how often have you met up with mates for coffee only to look around the table and realise that everyone’s peering down at their phones instead of talking to each other? Responding instantly to texts has become the new norm—a study conducted by researchers at the University of Kansas in 2012 asked college students to imagine receiving a message saying, “Text me when you can.” The students were then given two options: Either text back immediately and receive

a small monetary reward, or wait a while to reply and get a larger reward. The majority said they would rather text back straight away than take the extra money. More worryingly, Shari Walsh at the Queensland University of Technology studied the impact that the pressure to be constantly connected has on our sense of self and concluded that, “mobile phone use has become an intrinsic part of some young people’s self-concept, so much so that they are behaving in a manner similar to a behavioural addiction.”

SWITCHING OFF

Having moved from London to Dubai, I often find myself compulsively Whatsapping friends at home and scrolling Facebook for their updates, even when it’s at the expense of the new mates sitting right in front of me “IRL”. While researching this feature, I challenged myself to set aside my phone once I left work. The result? I reconnected with my housemates, actually followed the plot of the TV series I’m watching and had the best night’s sleep I’ve had in weeks.

Phone updates stimulate our brains in the same way as highly addictive narcotics /

Not surprising, since our mass phone addiction isn't just taking its toll on our mental health: it could be bad for our bodies, too. Professor Rajatnam, from Monash University's School of Psychology and Psychiatry, has found that the light emitted by mobile phones at night is "sufficient over a week or so to delay the timing of the circadian clock as well as suppress the production of the hormone melatonin," both of which make it harder to fall asleep. And a survey of 3,000 adults conducted last year by UK health insurance provider Simplyhealth found that 84 percent of 18-24 year-olds experienced back pain. The

cause? What's been dubbed "iPosture"—hunching over screens for hours a day. And then there's eye strain—or should I say iStrain? Opticians have attributed the increase in patients complaining of eye soreness, blurred vision and headaches to extended smartphone use.

There's a quick fix for both—though it might look and feel a bit odd. Mark Rosenfield, O.D., Ph.D., professor of optometry at the State University of New York, says holding your phone directly in front of you and at least 16 inches away from your face should help with back, neck and eye strain. Sleep experts also recommend switching off phones one or

two hour before bedtime to minimise the disruptive impact of looking at a bright screen.

But sometimes, we might just need to unplug altogether. "Our phones are part of life, and the benefits are almost innumerable in many ways," says Dr. Melanie Schlatter, a health psychologist and member of *WHME's* Advisory Board. "But like anything, if it starts creating regular negative emotions, it could be a problem. Switch off to regain your impulse control and ease of concentration, and to engage with those around you. After all, in the long run, your fondest memories won't be of your phone." ■

*Ban phones from the dinner table
and make "IRL" memories*



PHOTOGRAPHY: SHUTTERSTOCK.

3 SIGNS YOU'RE ADDICTED...

Phantom Vibration Syndrome

The name given by researchers to the belief that you can feel your phone vibrating even when it's not. A sure sign you're too attached.

Bed Fellows

Your phone is the last thing you look at before you go to sleep and the first thing you check upon waking. How, erm, romantic.

Itchy Fingers

You get physically uneasy at the thought of being separated from your phone, check it compulsively, and the only time you can remember switching off is when cabin crew forced you to.

...and 3 tricks for switching off:

Phone-Free Zone

Try banning your phone from the dining table or—better yet—from the bedroom. "Behavioural shifts also work," says Dr. Schlatter, "so you might even place it a few metres away from you, so that you can't reach for it during the night—merely checking the time can start an unanticipated search session!"

Take A Break

Start setting aside a couple of hours on the weekend for phone-free activities and, if you're feeling brave enough, work up to a whole day unplugged.

Get Some Zs

Make a rule that you won't look at your phone in the hour running up to bedtime and your body will thank you. (For more smart sleep hacks, flick to page 114!)