

# Is your phone obsession ruining your relationship?

In our column and podcast series, Professor Sarah Niblock, CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy, explores life's challenges. This issue, she looks at our dependence on our phones and 'technoference' in our personal interactions

While there's no doubt smartphones make it easier to find a partner, mobile phone technology is wreaking havoc on our relationships, say psychotherapists. Experts have concluded that 'technoference' – the typical interruptions caused by smartphones to everyday communication and activities – is harming intimacy. It's becoming one of the biggest sources of conflict in our relationships, right up there with arguments about money, children and sex.

## Runner-up to a device

Whether it's taking calls at the dinner table or texting while on a date, many clients report to therapists that sharing their partner with a digital device has a negative effect not only on their relationship but on their self-esteem.

It's almost second nature to many to have their phone in their hand and switched on at all times, so we may think little of a glance at social media or the headlines. In a recent study by the Pew Research Center, nearly 50 per cent of adults said they 'couldn't live without' their phones.

Whether we're queueing for a bus, waiting for a dentist appointment or even in bed at night, it's tempting to start scrolling rather than talk to the person you're with but, to partners, family members and even friends, it can send the message that they are less important or interesting than a lump of plastic.

So why might your phone be more seductive than the

person beside you? As every therapist knows, humans are hardwired to connect with others. For thousands of years, we have relied on our networks of family and friends for survival. These relationships must be founded upon trust and co-operation for them to thrive.

One way we learn to trust one another is to disclose personal information, so it is easy to understand why smartphones, the gateway to messaging and interaction not just locally but globally, make it easier than ever to feel that we are forging ever more bonds. Self-disclosure is a key characteristic of posting on social media, encouraged by the speed of responses to our sharing, which may feel like approval from complete strangers. But there is also a huge amount of evidence to show that those remote relationships, and the time they take away from our face-to-face communications, are ultimately harmful not only to our loved ones but to us.

What may feel like an innocuous, mindless click to you can, when done repeatedly, make a partner feel snubbed. It is as if you're saying 'what I am doing on my phone is more important than you'. Such rejections, however transient, build up over time and can lead to low mood, resentment and even diminished life satisfaction, which could result in depression.

Therapists believe it has reached such a crisis point that couples need to make time for conversations about



PHOTOGRAPH: PAL HANSEN. HAIR AND MAKEUP: CARL STANLEY

technology in the same way they might have summit talks about the boundaries of flirting!

They advise couples to share what's OK for them in their relationship. It's important for each partner to acknowledge when technology use may be valid – such as if one of you is a doctor on call or bound by the demands of parenting – but to agree to defined limits on non-essential surfing. Some therapists recommend couples agree to technology-free zones, say the bedroom and dinner table, or to have curfews on screen time.

## What's really wrong?

Of course, there will be occasions when you need to break the rules – essential work calls during annual leave do not have to mean the end of the relationship! To avoid conflict, couples can agree in advance on how they can best handle certain scenarios without either partner feeling hurt. As with all dependence, however, it's often not the phone that's the problem, rather it is a symptom of an underlying issue.

Psychotherapy can help individuals and couples uncover the deeper problems that may be driving our compulsion to check our phones constantly, even when our loved ones are in close proximity.

## ASK THE EXPERT...

Hilda Burke is a psychotherapist, couples counsellor and lecturer. She is also author of 'The Phone Addiction Workbook'



### Q How can we best start a conversation about excessive phone use with our partner?

Try to refrain from saying 'you're always on your phone!' When we accuse someone of 'always' doing something we don't like, or 'never' doing something we do like, it causes them to withdraw or get defensive. Instead, take responsibility for your behaviour: 'I notice that when you're on your phone, I tend not to want to engage with you' or 'we haven't been spending as much quality time together without devices and I miss it. How can we change that?' Then work out together how you can both be more present for each other.

### Q How should we deal with a social situation in which someone uses their phone all the time?

Again, the key is to make a request in a non-shaming way.

Ask your friend if they wouldn't mind taking their phone off the table during your time together. I've done this and friends generally find it reasonable. The tone we use is central though.

### Q What's the first step in understanding if there are underlying issues causing our phone addiction?

We must first admit that there is an issue, which involves humility and taking responsibility. In my book, I include phone usage charts for people to keep track of the time they spend on their phones and what was going on for them emotionally. Finding our triggers is crucial in understanding addiction. For some, it's boredom or anxiety. Observing and being honest about our feelings can go a long way in stalling us from picking up our phones in an unconscious way to 'numb out'.

'The Phone Addiction Workbook' (Ulysses Press, £13.99); hildaburke.co.uk



THE UKCP TALKING THERAPIES PODCAST

**Is your phone use damaging your relationship?** Listen to Sarah Niblock and Hilda Burke discuss phone addiction and how psychotherapy can help at [tinyurl.com/ud4t8u4](https://tinyurl.com/ud4t8u4)

## About the UKCP and how to find a therapist

• **The UKCP** Alongside professional support for our members, we are the leading research, innovation, educational and regulatory body working to advance psychotherapies for the benefit of all. Our membership includes more than 8,000 therapists and 70 training and accrediting organisations. Members work privately, in public health or third-sector organisations, offering a range of approaches for couples, individuals, families and groups.

• **To find the right therapist**, log on to [psychologies.co.uk/find-a-therapist](https://psychologies.co.uk/find-a-therapist) and look at our Life Labs Channel of experts who may be able to help, or visit [psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist](https://psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist) to locate a therapist near you.

