



Better connected

Your smartphone connects you to everything and everyone. It grants access to whatever you want, whenever you want it, but is it costing you opportunities for true face-to-face connections?

Imagine you're with a friend, telling them something deeply personal, when their phone suddenly beeps. The conversation is interrupted as they turn away from you and look towards the phone. You're left with the feeling that you're not as important as the message they've just received.

Phubbing – or the act of snubbing someone by using your phone in their company – is so ingrained in today's social behaviours that you might not even notice you're doing it. Phubbing may have become an unconscious habit but it can be managed, and even changed, for good.

Unconscious habits

Hilda Burke is a psychotherapist and author of *The Phone Addiction Workbook*. She believes the way you use a smartphone is similar to gambling: 'People don't get hooked because they expect to win every single time – it's more that they don't know when they will win. It's the same for a bird pecking a bird feeder. They'll do it constantly in order to get the intermittent rewards.'

The same principle applies to people checking their phone. You don't know when you'll get an exciting email or a message

from someone you've not heard from for a while, so you'll keep checking in the hope there'll be a reward waiting for you. Perhaps you're seeking affirmation of inclusion or acceptance, which is a very human need, but why might you favour these online rewards over real-life, present-moment connections?

Safer connections

It actually takes more courage to connect in person in the real world, as opposed to the digital world. Whatever you do online is on your terms, which reduces the risk of nasty surprises. Hilda says: 'You can turn off your phone or close an app at any time, but when you're physically present with someone, they could say something surprising that offends you or makes you uncomfortable. You can't just turn them off.'

Plus it's much easier to be your best self online and share only as much as you want others to see. When you're face-to-face with someone, you might feel much more exposed and vulnerable since it's harder to hide your emotions. The safer option is to hide behind your screen instead, but how often do you switch it off?

Reduced focus

Hilda believes a key component of good mental health is the ability to give your brain a rest. She says: 'You could meditate or take a walk, but if your phone is switched on and in your pocket, you're less likely to switch yourself off and get the headspace you need to recharge.'

Smartphones can also affect your ability to focus exclusively on one task at a time. 'When you're scrolling Facebook while you're with someone, you're more susceptible to overwhelm,' Hilda adds. 'It's as if you're juggling too many balls, which can be very anxiety provoking.' So what happens if the one task you're required to focus on is being present for another person?

Impaired relationships

Eye contact helps to cultivate empathy and intimacy. Repeatedly interrupting this to check your phone could undermine the trust held between two people. Couples therapist Silva Neves believes the less you look at each other, the harder it becomes to do so. He says: 'It seems simpler to text "what's for dinner?" than to look someone in the eye, and say, "let's cook together".'

Silva points out that phubbing conveys the message that someone isn't worthy of your time. 'If this happens often enough, the message becomes consolidated. The less you're noticed in a relationship, and the more devalued you feel, the harder it is to be vulnerable and ask for love.'

'It's the small things that make up a relationship. Putting down your phone and asking someone "what's it like to be you today?" can make a difference. You don't have to spend every meal together in mindful connection, but create and protect pockets of time where you look into each other's eyes and talk.'

Words: Jo Murphy

ILLUSTRATIONS: SAMANTHA NICKERSON

SNUB YOUR PHONE

If you've noticed you're giving more time to your phone than people, Hilda recommends downloading an app that tracks your smartphone usage. She says: 'It can be a wake-up call knowing you spend up to five hours a day on the phone.' Here are a few other ways that might help to change the habit:

- Commit to phone-free activities that you complete alone, such as a lunchtime stroll, and use this time to experiment with mindfulness.
- Make phone-free dates with friends and notice how this changes the dynamic between you.
- Write about your experiences to help you focus on what you're gaining rather than losing.

Build these phone-free periods gradually. Eventually, you'll regain time and focus by only using your phone when you need to. You may even begin to relish all the uninterrupted time you're spending with the important people in your life.

