

Cutting back: Ways that you — yes, you — can master your smartphone habit

By Barbara Ortutay

Julio Cortez / Associated Press 2016

Models can't ignore their cell phones between mixed martial arts bouts at UFC 205 in 2016 at Madison Square Garden in New York.



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For many of us, a smartphone addiction is not so much a debilitating disease but a constant, nagging inconvenience we can't seem to shake.



Why are we checking Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, then Facebook again when we just wanted to check the weather?

Turns out, smartphone addiction is by design. Think of the constant stream of notifications, color schemes in apps and all the Likes, followers and in-game trophies. Our phones and apps are designed to give us short-term, feel-good rewards, so we'll use them longer — at the expense of reading, enjoying the moment or simply being bored.

Some companies are relenting in response to concerns from customers and experts. Google's next operating system, for instance, will come with a "wind down" mode; the screen will automatically fade to gray at a designated time before bed. Another feature will automatically put your phone in "do not disturb" mode if you flip it face down on a table.

But most Android phones won't get this system, Android P, until late this year or even next year, if at all. And it's unclear whether Apple plans similar features for the iPhone.

So for now, here's how you can outsmart the smartphone yourself:

Limit notifications: Notice those red dots on iPhones and Samsung phones showing how many unread messages, news items or app updates you have left to read? Of course, you have.

"Red is a trigger color that instantly draws our attention," notes the Center for Humane Technology, an organization that promotes a healthier, less dependent relationship to technology.

Other Androids running the most recent version, Oreo, have smaller dots. There are no numbers, and colors are more subtle, but the concept is the same: to lure you into opening the app.

To foil that on iPhones and most recent Android phones, go to your phone's settings and turn off the dots, known as badges, for all but the handful of apps you care most about. These might be messaging apps you use with friends, or news services you want breaking-news alerts from. But do you really need a red dot for the 2,346 unread emails you have?

You can also turn off push notifications, app by app.

With Facebook, you'll need to go to the app's own settings to turn off the dozens of notification categories, such as "updates on your friends since you last logged in." Turning a category off will turn off dots for that category, too.

Detox regularly: It can be as simple as going to the bathroom without your phone or turning it off during meal times or even every Saturday. Leaving your phone behind helps your brain reset.

If you need a prompt on just why you should detox, try Moment, an app that automatically tracks how much you use your iPhone or iPad each day. It's not perfect, as the timer runs anytime your screen is unlocked, even if you've stepped away. Still, the results will probably surprise you. For Android, there's an app called QualityTime.

Set a schedule: Nir Eyal, author of "Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products," compares humans to lab mice in an experiment of random rewards. Mice, it turns out, respond "most voraciously to random rewards," Eyal wrote in 2012 .

Social media apps have perfected the art of random rewards. You don't know when you'll get a friend request, or a like, or even when you'll see a new post from a friend. Cue endless check-ins and scrolling.

Set aside a specific time each day to check Facebook — or email, or instant messages. Then resist the urge until the next scheduled time.

Along those lines, try deleting the Facebook app from your phone and check only from a computer. This could help reduce the temptation to check all day.

Turn off autoplay: Binge-watching might be fun sometimes, but it shouldn't be standard behavior. Services like YouTube and Netflix often play the next video automatically. Turn that off in the settings. Otherwise, it's easy to forget where time went in the middle of a "Stranger Things" binge.

Get an alarm clock: There was a time not too long ago when we were able to wake up without our phones, using a magical device called an alarm clock. Get one.

The Center for Humane Technology suggests banishing phones from your bedside, if not the entire bedroom. This should make for better sleep, partly because the blue light emitted from your phone can delay your body's release of melatonin, which helps your body go to sleep at night. But perking up after a bedtime Facebook Like or getting anxious after reading a news story can also disrupt your ZZZs.

So, put your phone a little farther away and who knows, you might even wake up and say good morning to your partner instead of checking your phone before you're even out of bed.

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