

Silicon Valley Smartphone Addiction Increases Loneliness, Isolation; No Different From Substance Abuse, Experts Say

by Ben Renner - 4 - In Brain Studies Happiness Studies Mobile Phone Studies Psychological Studies Technology Studies

8

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SAN FRANCISCO — It's well-known that smartphone, or more broadly, digital addiction can result in many negative mental effects on people over time. Recent **research** even found it creates a brain imbalance in teens. Now a new study finds that over-attachment to your phone can cause serious social problems — boosting feelings of loneliness and isolation — while worsening anxiety and depression symptoms.

Smartphones have become useful, everyday tools that essentially manage our daily lives. From calendars to calorie monitors to sleep aids, smartphone owners find themselves constantly glancing at their screens from the minute they wake up to the seconds before hitting the sack. Whether it's reading push notifications, responding to dings and vibrations, or constantly refreshing one's Facebook newsfeed on the go, the need for phone time is becoming a more serious problem.

Researchers behind the study, conducted at San Francisco State University, liken smartphone addiction to opioid dependency, arguing that overuse of a mobile device is no different from substance abuse.

 Women looking at smartphone

“The behavioral addiction of smartphone use begins forming

neurological connections in the brain in ways similar to how opioid addiction is experienced by people taking Oxycontin for pain relief — gradually,” explains Erik Peper, co-lead author of the study and professor of health education at the school, in a news **release**.

The ubiquity of smartphones today betrays their usefulness, but app developers and tech companies are highly incentivized to create features that draw your eyes, and your attention, as much as possible. “More eyeballs, more clicks, more money,” comments Peper.

Peper and co-author Richard Harvey surveyed 135 students at the university about their smartphone usage and general digital habits. The researchers found that the students that used their phones the most reported feeling more lonely and isolated than peers less dependent on their devices. The most frequent users also reported higher levels of depression and anxiety.

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Peper and his team theorized that the loneliness increase is due to the replacement of face-to-face interaction with screen-based interaction, which often cuts off forms of simultaneous communication such as body language. The researchers also found that those who used their smartphones the most were constantly multitasking when doing things like studying, eating, or watching other media. The constant activity allows little time for the body and mind to relax and regenerate, and causes what the researchers called “semi-tasking,” in which the students performed several tasks at once, but did them all about half as well as if they did them one at a time.

Interestingly, the researchers are quick to take the blame away from the study participants. Apps are using the same neural pathways that humans have to warn them of danger. “But now we are hijacked by

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those same mechanisms that once protected us and allowed us to survive — for the most trivial pieces of information,” says Peper. If you feel like your smartphone is taking over your life, Peper suggests turning off push notifications, limiting email and social media use to certain times of the day, and setting aside time to take on tasks without any use of your digital devices.

The **full study** was published in the journal *NeuroRegulation*.

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