

GET SMARTER WITH YOUR PHONE

Your phone is engineered to be addictive.
No wonder it pays to set your own rules

BY HELEN LAMMERS-HELPS

There's no doubt that smartphones are an incredible tool for farmers. We get the power of the internet in a device that fits in our pockets. With it comes the ability to check the weather, sell grain, listen to an audiobook, or identify a weed at the touch of our fingertips. Add in social media, and we can connect with family, friends, other farmers, customers, and the public wherever we are, whenever we want.

But now that smartphones have been part of our daily lives for 10 years, we are learning there's a dark side of the ubiquitous technology too. Every day we hear more media reports about how smartphones can damage relationships, harm our mental health, cause sleep deprivation, and even cause physical pain like "tech neck."

Surveys show that, on average, people are spending four hours a day on their phones and checking them 80 times a day. That number goes up to 150 times a day for millennials, and includes habitually checking their phones during the night.

This growing dependence on our phones shouldn't come as a surprise. University of Guelph professor of organizational behaviour Dr. Jamie Gruman studied the impacts of smartphones for his book, *Boost: The Science of Recharging Yourself in an Age of Unrelentless Demands*.

Gruman says social media apps have been explicitly designed using psychology to make them addictive.

Gruman also says internet addiction is a real thing. "Many people feel anxious if they have to be away from their phones," he says.

Is spending this much time on our phones really that bad? Researchers tell us smartphones can be damaging to the quality of our personal and work relationships. There are concerns too that small children are being neglected by their parents when their attention has been sidetracked by their phones.

Even something as seemingly benign as holding your phone in your hand or having it on the table while you are talking to someone sends a signal that you aren't engaged. It damages the conversation, Gruman says, and there's even a name for the practice.

When someone glances at their phone while you are talking to them, it's called "phubbing," short for "phone snubbing."

Journalist Catherine Price sums up the state of the research on the concerning impacts of smartphones in her

book, *How to Break Up with Your Phone*. She says we now know that spending extended time on our smartphones (or any computer device for that matter) has "the power to change both the structure and function of our brains — including our abilities to form new memories, think deeply, focus, and absorb and remember what we read."

Price goes on to state that "multiple studies have associated the heavy use of smartphones (especially when used for social media) with negative effects on neuroticism, self-esteem, impulsivity, empathy, self-identify, and self-image as well as sleep problems, anxiety, stress, and depression."

The potential for negative impacts on self-esteem, sleep, depression, anxiety and attention are especially alarming for children and teens, not only because they're more vulnerable, but because they're also at higher risk.

HIDING THE BORING BITS

Gruman says the research clearly shows that passively using social media (i.e. scrolling through your social media feeds) has a detrimental effect on your well-being. Generally, people only post their positive life experiences such as photos of their vacation or new car on social media. Because it doesn't show the real world, we feel bad by comparison.

Even if you're not a social media user, Gruman warns about the destructive aspects of what he calls "available-ism." When we remain tethered by our phones to our work after hours and while on vacation, we aren't able to recuperate from work. Even if you love your work, you can still become depleted, he says.

"We feel like we're on call 24/7, which has negative consequences," says Gruman. "We feel we can't disengage, and this impacts the quality of our sleep which is the most important recovery method." The result: "You won't be as healthy or as happy."

Being on our phones right before bedtime can interfere with the quantity and quality of our sleep. The light from our phones has been shown to disrupt our sleep, as will reading a distressing email or text right before bed.

Chronic sleep deprivation can lead to a whole host of negative physical consequences such as increased risk of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. It can also have negative consequences for our mental health such as reduced ability to tolerate stress, reduced attention span, and increased moodiness.

With the high levels of stress and burn-out in the agriculture industry, the opportunity to disconnect and recover deserves attention.

TAKING CONTROL

The good news is that we can balance the usefulness of smartphones with their negative aspects by being mindful of how we're using our phones and by setting some boundaries.

Chilliwack, B.C. psychologist and business coach Pam Paquet says you need to ask yourself, "Are you controlling the technology or is it controlling you?" If you are constantly available, you run the risk of draining yourself and burning out, she warns.

Instead, she advises clients to turn off their phones during lunch, dinner and after 9 p.m. each evening. "How available do you need or want to be? If it's not a real emergency, people can leave messages."

SET RULES YOU CAN FOLLOW

It's important to set real, measurable boundaries around smartphones, says Paquet. Make a commitment like "I'm going to take Wednesday night off to spend with my kids" or "I'm going to take 30 minutes for lunch with no tech."

Gruman agrees. It's about mentally detaching. He disconnects for an hour each evening, turning off his computer so he won't be tempted to check email. Any amount of time you can "free yourself from the electronic tether" is good, he says. Also, keep your phone out of your bedroom, even if this means buying an alarm clock.

Some families have created rules around phone use at meal time. In some cases, everyone must place their phones in a basket on the table until the meal is over. Others allow the phones to be used but only if it's to show a funny text or photo that is to be shared with all.

Price and her husband practise a weekly Digital Detox, taking a restorative 24-hour break from smartphones and all internet-enabled devices each week.

If you find checking to see how many "likes" you got on your latest Instagram post is too tempting, try removing the apps from your phone, says Gruman.

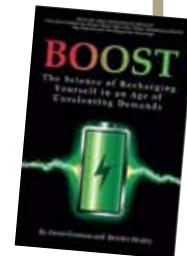
Some people have resorted to carrying a work phone and personal phone to help them avoid the sense of "being on" all the time, continues Gruman. Others have reverted to using old-fashioned flip-phones for enabling basic communication without the bells and whistles of a smartphone.

Gruman says it's important that employees also have regular opportunities to disconnect from work. Ensuring your employees have time to unhook will result in healthier, happier and more productive employees and is good for business, says Gruman.

Price designed a 30-day plan to help people create boundaries around their phone use which she outlines in her book. Although the book is called *How to Break Up with your Phone*, it's not actually about getting rid of your smartphone. It's really about restoring the balance, she says, and having the best of both worlds. **CG**

Resources

- *Boost: The science of recharging yourself in an age of unrelenting demands* by Jamie Gruman (Information Age Publishing, 2018).
- *How to Break Up with your Phone* by Catherine Price (Ten Speed Press, 2018).
- *Smartphone Disrespect* by organizational consultant Simon Sinek, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HTGRMWhcIcM.
- Center for Humane Technology, an American organization co-founded by former Google manager, Tristan Harris, whose mission is to realign technology with humanity's best interests. Find tips for setting boundaries on smartphone use, Humanetech.com/take-control.
- Common Sense Media is an independent U.S. non-profit organization geared to helping children thrive in the digital age which started the Device-free Dinner Movement, www.commonsensemedia.org/device-free-dinner#sign-up.



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