

Recognizing the Symptoms of Cell Phone and Internet Addiction

A 2016 report published in *Frontiers in Psychiatry* suggests using the DSM-5 criteria for compulsive gambling and substance abuse to measure problematic smartphone use. While problematic smartphone use is not defined as an addiction, it can be evaluated as a behavioral disorder.

Using this model, potential symptoms might include the following:

- Conscious use in prohibited contexts or potentially dangerous situations (e.g. texting while driving)
- Excessive use that causes conflicts with family; withdrawing from family or shared events in favor of smartphone use
- Negative effects on school, family, social, or emotional functioning
- Continued excessive use despite negative effects
- Impulsive, frequent, constant checking of phone, even in short bursts (feels strong need to check every few minutes)
- Insomnia or sleep disturbances related to frequent checking
- Excessive urgency or need to be connected
- Increase in use to achieve satisfaction or counteract dysphoric (sad) mood
- Need to respond immediately to messages and alerts
- Increased anxiety and/or irritability if phone is not accessible
- Feelings of unease when unable to use the phone

It can be difficult to distinguish between normal (or slightly elevated) daily use and problematic use. It helps to ask yourself the following questions:

- Does my teen become angry, irritable, anxious, or even violent when the phone is taken away or unable to be used?
- Does my teen skip or avoid social events or extracurricular activities to use the smartphone instead?
- Is my teen's personal care (hygiene), friendships, family relationships, or school work negatively affected by smartphone use?

- Does smartphone use interfere with my teen's normal sleep routine?
- Are there any major changes in my teen's eating habits that can't otherwise be explained?
- Are there any major changes in mood that can't otherwise be explained?

How to Help Teens Overcome a Smartphone Addiction

Believe it or not, smartphone use can be beneficial for teens. Teens use smartphones to connect with peers, seek help on school assignments, and they can even use apps to help them get organized. Although it might seem like teens are constantly connected, many use their devices within healthy limits.

It's important to empower teens to take control of their own use of smartphones and create and maintain a healthy balance. This isn't a one-time conversation. A few things you can do help provide guidance and support include the following:

- **Educate:** Talk openly about the benefits and potential pitfalls of screen time. Lecturing rarely yields positive results, but asking your teens for input about the pros and cons can spark lively conversations. How does too much screen time affect us physically, emotionally, academically, and socially? What can we gain from using our smartphones responsibly?
- **Make a plan:** Talk about setting healthy limits and boundaries for the family and what checks and balances you can use to stick to them, like not allowing phone use during dinner. Remember, teens aren't the only ones prone to overuse. What happens if parents are pushing the family screen time limits?
- **Monitor use as a family:** Teens look for workarounds when they feel like they're being watched. Make monitoring a family goal so that teens own up to their usage and behavior online. There are several apps available to monitor how and when your teens use their phones. The iPhone now has a "screentime" setting. You can use this to track usage and set healthy limits for specific apps (e.g. xx hours per day for social media) and to shut down apps at a certain time. Talk with your teens about healthy and realistic limits.
- **Create a check-in policy:** Phones, tablets, and laptops should be removed from the bedroom at night to curb sleep disturbance and insomnia. Create a plan to check devices in at a certain time in the evening and out in the morning.

- **Establish screen-free zones:** Meals, family outings, and social gatherings are examples of times when frequent checking negatively affects relationships. Set boundaries for screen use in these settings and stick to them.
- **Model healthy boundaries:** When parents are glued to their phones, teens learn that this is appropriate behavior. Stick to the limits and boundaries you set.

What do I do if my teen can't stop using the phone?

If you suspect that your teen is “addicted” or smartphone use is negatively affecting your teen’s daily functioning, get help.

- **Cognitive Behavior Therapy** can help your teen change maladaptive thoughts and behaviors into healthy and positive ones.
- **Individual process therapy** can help teens recognize and work through feelings and experiences that contribute to problematic use.
- **Download apps** designed to help curb use (e.g. Breakfree and Mental)
- **Practice [mindfulness](#)** to curb urges.
- **Practice adaptive coping strategies** like exercise, deep breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation.

It’s smart for parents to keep tabs on levels of smartphone use among teens, as mindless scrolling and viewing can waste hours of time and affect daily functioning. With healthy limits in place and frequent conversations, families can establish digital diets that work for the whole family.