



6 ANYBODY LISTENING? MINDFULNESS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

You've got it in your pocket or purse. It's never far away, calling for your constant attention: "Look at me! Look at me!" Yup, we're talking about your smartphone—that little box that can stir up social media drama any time of the day or night. Is it your friend or foe?

According to polls, some teens (45 percent) say social media has neither a positive nor a negative effect on their lives. Others (31 percent) think social media is all positive. They like having quick access to news, and they feel empowered by being part of online communities. They can connect to friends easily. A smaller group (24 percent) of teens thinks social media has a mostly negative impact on their lives.

Having a phone is a big distraction for some people, especially when they have to do homework or concentrate on an important task



Studies show that texting and participating in social media can lead to anxiety and self-criticism. Use your mindfulness practice to review and modify your relationship to your devices. You may find that by cutting back on social media and texting, you feel less stressed out.

or at the workplace. Others feel bad about themselves when they use social media because they compare themselves physically to others in online photos and worry they don't look as good. Knowing that people filter and manipulate photos doesn't lessen their negative feelings. Or they see their peers together in online photos and feel excluded. Some say that with social media, bullies have a bigger platform and can spread rumors faster than they could before smartphones were invented.

Because social media is so portable, immediate, and constant, it amplifies the negative effects of rumor and judgment. And devices can cause social disconnect. Most of us know what it feels like when we're trying to talk to someone, but we find them staring at their smartphone instead, totally absorbed in digital life.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

Researchers say that electronic devices have positive and negative effects on well-being. According to Jean Twenge, professor of psychology at

WHAT ARE THE UPSIDES TO SOCIAL MEDIA?

"What I like about it [social media] the most is that whenever you're lonely or something, you can access your friends really quickly."

—Beatrice E., high school student

"I go on YouTube for a lot of comedy, because I like to laugh. A lot. I usually look up riddles. There's a whole channel that has them."

—Balseba T., high school student

"I try to follow really uplifting pages, like happy quotes and really motivational things. And so, when I've had a really bad day, it's nice to get on social media and watch really stupid videos of dogs, and that lifts my mood."

—E. Parnell, high school student

"I think social media can make me feel a bit sluggish, a bit slow. Maybe it makes me feel more relaxed, so I don't feel like doing much else when I'm on my phone."

Dominic C., high school student

San Diego State University, "The arrival of the smartphone has radically changed every aspect of teenagers' lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health." She says that some of the changes are positive, some are negative, and many are both. Twenge's research shows that twenty-first-century teenagers go out with friends less often than previous generations, learn to drive later, have sex for the first time later, and are less likely to work in after-school jobs. One reason for these delays is that teens are staying home and hanging out on devices instead of going out and trying new activities. That homebody behavior might keep teens physically safer and reduce the likelihood

of teen pregnancies, but Twenge believes that teens are more at risk for psychological distress than were those of previous generations. “There is compelling evidence that the devices we’ve placed in young people’s hands are having profound effects on their lives—and making them seriously unhappy,” says Twenge.

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

Other researchers say that moderate screen use probably doesn’t harm teens and they may benefit emotionally from the social connections online. That’s good news for people who check in daily but don’t stay glued to their phone. But young adults who spend two or more hours a day on social media are more likely to report feeling anxious and depressed than those who spend less time online. According to a report by the Royal Society for Public Health in the United Kingdom, Instagram and Snapchat have the strongest negative effects on the mental health of young people. One reason is that teens compare their looks to images of others (sometimes digitally enhanced or filtered) on these platforms and often feel bad if they think they don’t measure up. They also compare the number of engagements of their own posts to those of others, and they often feel bad if few people like or comment on their posts.

Psychologists and psychiatrists say that some teens are actually addicted to their phones. Signs of addiction include the inability to resist using the phone and anxiety when the phone is not available for use. Teens who are addicted to their phones have significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, insomnia, and impulsivity (acting with little or no forethought or reflection) than nonaddicted teens. Researchers have also found an imbalance of brain chemistry in teens addicted to smartphones. Addicted teenagers have higher than normal amounts of a brain chemical called gamma-aminobutyric acid. Side effects of these increased levels include drowsiness and anxiety.

USING DIGITAL DEVICES MINDFULLY

Perhaps you experience only positive effects from using social media, and you ask, “What’s the big deal?” But if you’ve ever scrolled through social media and come away feeling sluggish, unhappy, or unable to sleep, you might want to explore your personal connection to your electronic devices and to social media. Start by taking the following self-assessment and trying the mindfulness exercise afterward:

Social Media Self-Assessment

This assessment is meant to help you to think about your connection to your phone and social media—both the positives and the negatives. Write down your answers. When you are done, make a tally of the number of positive and negative responses.

- *Do you check your phone as soon as you wake up?*
- *Do you feel a constant urge to check your phone?*
- *Do you go on social media for more than two hours per day?*
- *Does going online ever change your mood?*
- *Do you use social media to forget about personal problems?*
- *If going online changes your mood, does it usually change it for the better?*
- *Do you use your device at mealtime?*
- *Can you become so focused on your device that you ignore what’s happening around you?*
- *Are you ever so engaged by social media that you neglect homework or other obligations?*
- *Do you ever say no to doing things with friends or family because you want to hang out on your phone or other device?*
- *Do you feel more connected to other people when you check social media?*
- *Do you organize social events on social media?*
- *Do you use your phone or social media for creative or artistic projects?*

- *Do you use social media to stay informed about a special area of interest, such as sports, music, theater, art, politics, or science?*
- *Would you be annoyed if you couldn't look up information online whenever you wanted to?*
- *Do you feel anxious when your smartphone is out of battery power?*
- *Do you feel anxious if you don't have your smartphone with you?*
- *Do you walk and text or post at the same time?*
- *If you drive, do you ever text or look at social media while driving?*
- *Do you say whatever you want on social media?*
- *Do you worry about backlash if you post something honest or controversial?*
- *Do you stress about your online image?*
- *Do you compare your social media feed to the feeds of other people?*
- *Do you focus on the number of likes or engagements with your post?*
- *Do you ever feel bad about yourself or about your life after looking at social media?*
- *Do you ever have trouble going to bed because you don't want to get off social media?*
- *Do you ever have trouble falling asleep because you're thinking about something on social media?*

If you find that negative responses outweigh positives for you, the following mindfulness exercises can help. (If the assessment makes you worry that you might even have an addiction to your phone, you could take this assessment to a counselor or doctor to discuss it.)

No matter how much we love our smart devices, they can get in the way of being in the present. Sometimes the present is boring or tedious, so grabbing your phone may feel like a great escape.

ARE THERE DOWNSIDES TO USING SOCIAL MEDIA?

"The phone can be a stressor. I recognize it is not really that healthy to be worrying about Instagram and Snapchat and things like that. But sometimes I think, 'Oh, other people's pictures are better than the one I just posted, or they have more likes or got more comments than I did.' And sometimes if you have free time, you'll unconsciously just take out your phone and check Instagram. I will admit that I wake up and quickly check Instagram and Snapchat. Like, that's kind of the first thing I do. I spend a lot of time on Instagram, probably more than I should. It's become a habit."

—Maggie S., high school student

"I'm distracted. I don't realize all the cool things that are happening around me. I'll be so in depth on a book on my phone that I don't realize we just passed up, like, the coolest tree. Or, I'll be scrolling through Instagram and I don't realize that my grandparents just walked in the door. I'll realize it after five minutes, and I'll be, like, 'Oh my goodness, I'm a horrible person. I didn't realize my grandparents just walked in.' So, I'll throw my phone to my bed and go downstairs and hang out with them."

—Elizabeth Grace, high school student

"It gets so dramatic very easily on social media. I find that when something happens over social media, people tend to think that you're trying to avoid them in some sort of way. And it adds extra layers that aren't necessary. When you go into school and see them in person, you're not really sure what to do because you're not really sure what just happened on the phone. They could pretend it never happened or they could keep pretending it's happening. You don't really know how to gauge it."

—Beatrice E., high school student

"If I'm hanging out with my friends, and they're always on social media, it gets kind of aggravating because they're like 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, we can do that later.' I would rather be going to do something outside compared to sitting inside all day when it's nice outside."

—Alexander B., high school student

Other times, you might mindlessly check your phone out of habit. You might get sucked into social media and miss connecting more meaningfully to other people and to yourself. The next exercise will help you think about why you're checking your phone. Do this exercise before checking it:

Before Checking Your Phone

Holding your phone, take three mindful breaths. Notice the expansion and contraction of your chest and belly as you breathe. Relax more and more with each breath.

Stop and ask yourself, "Why do I really want to check my phone right now?" If you wait a second or two, you may find the urge to check the phone passes.

Then ask yourself, "Am I obsessing about something?" Explore the obsession to see if it's something that requires attention or if it's a sudden impulse that you can redirect through mindful breathing.

Do a body scan and ask, "What am I feeling in my body?" If you are feeling a strong emotion, you might have physical sensations tied to it. Is your body relaxed and calm? Or do you feel heavy and sluggish? Are your muscles tight? What other physical sensations do you have? Are they connected to your emotions?

Look around and find one interesting thing to focus on. It could be something in your favorite color, a favorite picture, or a pet you love. Focus on that thing for thirty seconds to build a sense of calm and happiness. This helps you focus on the present and to notice where you are, so you don't lose yourself in the virtual world.

Try asking yourself, "What do others around me need right now?" You may find that it's more important to help out than to look at your phone.



When you communicate by texting, you miss out on subtle social cues, such as facial expressions and the speaker's tone of voice. Using images, such as emojis and GIFs, can help. But they don't take the place of in-person communication. Take breaks from your phone to improve relationships with friends and family.

By doing this exercise, you may decide that you do want or need to look at your phone. If you do decide to use your phone, check back in with yourself afterward. Ask yourself, “How do I feel now?” Do you have a sense of satisfaction about accomplishing something important on your phone? Are you happy about having talked to a friend? Did you read something meaningful on social media? Or do you feel anxious or unhappy? Return to the exercise occasionally or even regularly to check in with yourself about your relationship with your device. Here's another exercise to help you explore your connection with your phone:

Conscious Connection

*Sit in a mindful position, and hold your phone in your hands.
Put your phone on Do Not Disturb, and click off the home screen.
Start by taking three mindful breaths.*

Notice the expansion and contraction of your chest and belly as you breathe.

Relax more and more with each breath.

Imagine sinking deeply into your seat.

Feel the weight of your phone in your hands.

Notice if you have an urge to look down and turn your phone back on.

If you don't have an urge, rest in that calm space.

Close your eyes, and notice the sounds around you.

If or when you have an urge to use your phone, ask yourself, "What is driving the urge?"

Is it a physical sensation?

Is it a thought?

Is it an emotion?

Watch that sensation, thought, or emotion to see if it shifts.

Become curious about it.

Ask yourself, "Isn't it interesting that I am drawn to my phone?"

Ask yourself, "How did this urge begin?"

Squeeze your phone, and notice the sensation.

Ask yourself, "Does this small device help me feel happier?"

If it doesn't, reflect on why you want to use it.

Does it change the way you see yourself?

Do you want to change something about the way you use your phone?

Do you want to control your phone or let it control you?

Focus on your breathing again.

Open your eyes, and take in the place where you are sitting.

Consciously make a choice whether to use your phone right away or not.

Bring your focused attention with you into whatever you decide to do after you end this exercise.

MINDFULNESS ON YOUR PHONE

There are many ways to add a smartphone to your mindfulness practice. You can use a mindfulness or meditation app that guides you through breathing exercises or visualizations. You'll find a list of such apps in the Further Information section at the end of this book. You can also go online and watch YouTube videos that guide you through mindfulness exercises.

Meditating with your cell phone is a way of bringing awareness to how you use your device. It slows you down so you can make a conscious choice about when to use your phone or device.

Another way to approach your device mindfully is to take breaks from it. For example, instead of checking your phone for a break as you do homework, stand and stretch or do a short mindful walk around your room. Do a few squats or jumping jacks, go outside, or poke your head out a window for a few moments of fresh air. Here are some other ideas to try:

- Take a timed break from your phone on a weekend day. Start with half an hour or an hour at any point in the day or evening hours. Work up over a period of weeks to more timed breaks from your device.
- Turn off all sounds and notifications on your phone for an hour on any day you choose. Once that becomes easier, try doing it for several hours, then eventually a whole day.
- Choose a day to send only a limited number of text messages. You choose the number. See if you can do this more regularly every week. As it becomes more familiar, you may find yourself texting less.
- Choose a day to have only face-to-face conversations. Don't text at all.



Set aside time each day or each week for connecting in person—without using devices to communicate.

If you try any of these ideas, remember to tell your friends and family about your break, so they won't be concerned when you don't answer your phone. And let them know how they can contact you in an emergency.

FACE-TO-FACE OR BEHIND THE SCREEN?

Sometimes you'd rather talk on social media than face-to-face. Messaging is fast and easy, and you can communicate privately, without anyone overhearing. Maybe you have something difficult to say, and you'd rather not look someone else in the eye when you communicate this information. Or maybe it's simpler to send out a group message than calling or texting individuals about the same thing.

But then sometimes you're joking in a message and the other person doesn't get the joke. When you don't see facial expressions or hear a tone of voice, you can easily mistake a joke for an insult. Sometimes when

you say something, an online conflict flares up. Or you read a message from a friend and don't respond, and they think you're ignoring them, resulting in hurt or angry feelings. Most of us are on the go and want to get our messages out fast. But oops! We put in an awkward typo or didn't mean what we texted or we sent it to the wrong person.

Slow chatting—or chatting with mindfulness—is one way to make sure we say what we mean and mean what we say on social media. Try this exercise for an introduction to slow chat:

Mindful Slow Chat

When you receive a text, read it first. Then pause before you type a reply.

Take three mindful breaths.

Notice the expansion and contraction of your chest and belly as you breathe.

Relax more and more with each breath.

Imagine sinking deeply into your seat.

Check your thoughts and emotions.

Before you text back, ask yourself, What is my purpose in responding to this message?

Imagine the other person or people receiving your message.

How do you want them to react? Are you making accurate assumptions about how they will react?

What is your intention?

Pause.

Type your message.

Pause.

Reread it.

Pause.

Remind yourself of the purpose for sending the message. Make any changes you think will improve your messaging.

Decide whether to send or delete it. You may realize that sending your text will cause more harm than good. Then it's smart to delete it.

The more you practice these exercises, the more conscious you will be when you hold or use your device. You are in control!