

Summer is Coming! Give your Smartphone a Break

by BZA therapist Tom Fitzer, LSW

We have made it through the long winter and rainy spring. Beautiful weather and outdoor activities are on the way. Why don't you think about giving your smartphone the summer off? Actually, I should rephrase that, why don't you think about giving your brain the summer off from your smartphone.

Smartphones are a truly unbelievable piece of technology. They give us directions to places we would never be able to find without having to use a clunky, outdated map. They allow us to communicate in all sorts of ways. Smartphones can take beautiful pictures, you can play games on them, you can watch your favorite movie or show on them and you can even hit a few buttons to have a car to come and pick you up and drive you somewhere. These things are great, right? You may be asking, "Why would I give it a break?". Your smartphone may not be so great when it comes to feeling good.

Let's first talk about Present-Moment Awareness. These days it is hard to go five minutes without being interrupted by our smartphone, and it may not even be alerting you. We tend to want to check it often to see what is going on. We derive pleasure out of looking at our phones. How many followers do I have, how many people liked my post, who emailed me, etc. As much as we feel good when somebody likes our post, we are being pulled from that actual real moment in time. When we are constantly at our phones' beck and call, we don't have a moment to enjoy the here-and-now. This has the ability to raise our anxiety levels. As a society, we already feel so overwhelmed and busy. Smartphones add to this stress by never giving us a moment to ourselves to take a deep breath and enjoy what is happening around us in the present moment.

Smartphones make it easier for us to be distracted and lose focus. This then rolls over into everyday life. People are having less face-to-face conversations. When we are not interacting with each other in a physical space it can make it more difficult to pick up social cues and have empathy for others. Those are two extremely important aspects of human behavior that create a healthy society. These days' social media is creating a giant façade for children and adults to live up to. We don't know what is real and what isn't when it comes to people's posts, stories and profiles on social media, because let's face it people usually post "their best lives." Our smartphones allow us to have access to this information every second of the day. We consume this information and it creates a sense of "not having enough" in many people. This can then lead to a lowered self-esteem. These expectations that are created are not plausible for most people to live up to, and it does not make people feel good.

So, I'm not really asking you to give your smart phone the entire summer off. What I am asking is for you to consider putting it down and turning it off more often this summer. You can try and do a few things to make this easier for you. First, be intentional about cutting back on usage. If you are going to go out for a hike or walk leave the phone behind. If you can't see yourself leaving it behind, then turn it off and keep it with you. Tell yourself that this walk will be a half hour walk of me and the present moment. Another idea is to turn off the phone or mute it during meals. This will allow you to have a break and enjoy your food more. If you are with other people you will be able to give them your full attention and be engaged without worrying about your phone interrupting you. This is especially important when it comes to being engaged with your family. Make time to focus on your children, parents, siblings, etc. It will be good for everybody involved. How about trying a "Smart-phone fast." This is when you give up your smartphone use for a certain amount of time. Even if it is for a couple hours it can be good for you.

This summer, please remember to enjoy what is in front of you and be grateful for your precious moments. Do not allow a device to take away your attention from family, friends and experiences. In the end, it could improve how you feel and give you a reinvigorated meaning and passion for a life that exists without a screen.