

Addicted to phones? Cell phone use becoming a major problem for some, expert says

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“Turn off your cell phones and pagers.” For most people, heeding these warnings in hospitals or at the movies is as simple as pressing a button. But for a growing number of people across the globe, the idea of being out of touch, even just for a 90-minute movie, is enough to induce anxiety, says a University of Florida psychologist who studies addictions to the Internet and other technologies.

Although cellular phones and personal digital assistants such as the BlackBerry were created to make modern life more convenient, they’re actually beginning to interfere in the lives of users who don’t know when to turn them off, says Lisa Merlo, an assistant professor of psychiatry in the UF College of Medicine.

“It’s not so much talking on the phone that’s typically the problem although that can have consequences too,” Merlo said. “(It’s) this need to be connected, to know what’s going on and be available to other people. That’s one of the hallmarks of cell phone addiction.”

Unlike addictions to alcohol, drugs or even gambling, it can be hard to pinpoint problematic cell phone use. Almost everyone has a cell phone and uses it regularly. But if someone can’t get through dinner without sending text messages or furiously typing on a personal digital assistant during a meeting, it may be time to take a step back, Merlo said.

How people respond to being separated from their cell phones or PDAs is another clue. Frequent users often become anxious when they are

forced to turn off the phone or if they forget it at home, so much so that they can't enjoy whatever they're doing, Merlo added. Often, cell phone "addicts" compulsively check their phones for voicemails and text messages, she said.

"When (cell phone overuse) really becomes problematic for a lot of people is if they have underlying anxiety or depression," she said. "This can really exacerbate it or (cause) their symptoms to manifest themselves."

For example, someone who already worries about what others think of them could become easily agitated if their phone calls or messages aren't returned right away.

"This is something that is going to affect them on a day-to-day basis," Merlo said.

The problem seems to be growing. A Japanese study revealed that children with cell phones often don't make friends with their less tech-savvy peers, a Hungarian study found that three-fourths of children had mobile phones and an Italian study showed that one quarter of adolescents owned multiple phones and many claimed to be somewhat addicted to them. A British study also recently found that 36 percent of college students surveyed said they could not get by without cell phones. But this may be more a sign that students view cell phones as a modern necessity like a car, said David Sheffield, a psychologist who conducted the study at Staffordshire University in England.

"The most shocking figure was that 7 percent said the use of mobile phones had caused them to lose a relationship or a job," Sheffield said.

Although experts have pinpointed these problems in frequent cell phone users, studies have yet to show if a bad cell phone habit constitutes an

actual addiction. Yet as with traditional addictions, excessive cell phone use is associated with certain hallmark patterns of behavior, including using something to feel good, building up a tolerance and needing more of it over time to get the same feeling, and going through withdrawal if deprived of it, Merlo said.

Cell phone users could start out with one phone and switch to newer models with more advanced features or PDAs that act like mini-computers over time to get the same feeling they had with their first phone, she said. Although withdrawal is typically considered a physical response that occurs when the body goes without a chemical, the anxiety cell phone users feel without their phone could simply be another form of withdrawal.

“Those things lend toward the idea that maybe this is an addiction, but maybe it’s manifesting in a little bit different way than you would think of a chemical substance,” Merlo said.

Addiction also causes changes in the brain, but scientists have yet to measure what happens in the brains of cell phone users, she said. Even eating and other behaviors have been shown to produce the same effects in the brain as drugs and alcohol in some people, UF studies have shown.

For frequent phoners who do think they have a problem or for parents of children obsessed with their cells, Merlo advises downgrading to a basic phone with fewer features and setting limits about where and when to use the phone.

“Cell phones are a great technology,” Merlo said. “They’re useful in a lot of situations. (But) one of the most important things is making sure you have some cell phone free time in your day. It’s OK to turn it off. Focus on family, homework, knowing that cell phone message will still be there.”

Source: University of Florida

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