

WATCH OUT: CELL PHONES CAN BE ADDICTIVE

Too much dependence on your smartphone isn't smart

by Kathiann Kowalski 2014

Dr. James Roberts is marketing professor and the author of a study about cell phone addiction that appeared in the August 2014 *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*. Here, Kathiann Kowalski of *Science News for Students* covers the results of his study.



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The average college student uses a smartphone for about nine hours each day.

That's longer than many of those students spend sleeping. In fact, such extended cell phone use shows that the technology could become an addiction, according to a new study. An addiction is a type of uncontrolled and unhealthy habit.

It's well known that people can become addicted to drugs, such as alcohol, narcotics and the nicotine in cigarettes. What's not so well known: "People can be addicted to behaviors," says James Roberts. He's a marketing professor at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Roberts also was the lead author of the new study. It appears in the August *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*.

Some cell phone users show the same symptoms that a drug addict might have, Roberts explains. Certain people use smartphones to lift their moods. And it may take more and more time on those phones to provide the same level of enjoyment.

For such people, losing a phone or having its battery die could cause anxiety or panic. That's withdrawal, says Roberts.

Too much phone use can interfere with normal activities or cause conflicts with family and other people, he adds. Yet despite these social costs, people may not cut back on their heavy phone use. Indeed, he says, people might be unable to stop on their own.

The new study asked college students how much time they spent on different phone activities. It also asked them how much they agreed or disagreed with statements suggesting possible addiction. "I spend more time than I should on my cell phone," said one such statement. "I get agitated when my cell phone is not in sight," said another. (Agitated means nervous or troubled.) The more calls someone made, the more likely they were to show signs of addiction.

The data also differed a bit for men and women.

Among men, for instance, signs of a possible addiction showed a positive link, or correlation, with time spent on a Bible app and apps for reading books. As use of either app increased, so did the risk of addiction. Men's use of social media apps, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, also correlated with risk of addiction.

Women were more likely to show signs of addiction if they often used Pinterest, Instagram, Amazon or apps that let them use their phones like an iPod. Apps for the Bible, Twitter, Pandora and Spotify showed an inverse correlation. That is, heavy use of those apps was linked to a lower risk of phone addiction.

A correlation does not prove that one factor causes another. But those links can provide helpful clues. Roberts says the study's results point to the types of rewards each gender might seek from cell phone use. For instance, "men use technology — cell phones in particular — more for entertainment and information," Roberts notes.

"Women use the phone more for maintaining and nurturing social relationships," he says. Those types of activities often take more time. And, on average, women did use phones longer each day than men did.

But simply because people used their phones a lot does not mean they were addicted.

Tracii Ryan is a psychologist at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. She's also the lead author of a report on Facebook addiction in the same issue of the *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*.

"Withdrawal and excessive use are certainly two legitimate symptoms of addiction," she notes. But, she adds, "They are not the only two that would be required for a diagnosis."

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Roberts agrees. However, he points out, there isn't a good scale yet for measuring all of the factors behind cell phone addiction.

Ryan makes a similar point about studies on Facebook addiction. "Researchers have not always measured Facebook addiction using all of the accepted symptoms of addiction," she says. "More consistent research is needed."

Yet Ryan's report offers insight into the main reasons why people use Facebook. Some want to interact with friends. Some want to pass time. Some want entertainment. And some people seek companionship.

"Any one of these motivations might cause a lift in mood, which then leads to Facebook addiction," Ryan says. Someone might turn to Facebook to relieve loneliness, for example. But that person might use the site so much that it causes problems.

"The important point to take away from both studies is that technology use can become addictive for some people," says Ryan.

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As researchers keep asking questions, ask yourself some, too: How much time do you spend with your phone or other technologies? What activities do you use them for —and why? Do you use the technology when you should be paying attention in class or to other things? And how easily can you go a day — or even a week — without a phone or logging onto a social media or networking site?

Remember, the researchers say: Technology helps when it's a tool — not when it is an unhealthy addiction.