

# The 5 Reasons You Can't Stop Checking Your Phone

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# The 5 Reasons You Can't Stop Checking Your Phone

Written by Nicole Lipkin, Psy.D., M.B.A. – 11/19/15

***"I'm bigger and I'm faster. I will always beat you."***

This is what Joan Crawford tells her daughter, Christina, in the 1981 movie 'Mommie Dearest' after shamefully beating her in a swimming race. When it comes to your phone you might want to think of your brain as Joan Crawford and yourself as Christina; you can't beat your brain's phone addiction, it will always win.

A new study has found that every time your phone distracts you with its buzzes and beeps your performance suffers, whether you respond to them or not.

A related study by Gloria Mark at the University of California-Irvine revealed that at work we are typically able to attend to one task for about three minutes before we are interrupted. They concluded that it takes about 20 minutes for people to return their full focus to the original task at hand. This does not bode well for productivity let alone our sanity.

Somewhere in the back of our minds we know we should not be beholden to this shiny object of immediate gratification, but there's a fine line between knowing and doing. So why don't we practice the doing more often?

## **1. The Dopamine Loop.**

Dopamine makes you crave and desire, seek out and search. The Opioid system makes you feel pleasure. These two systems, the wanting and the liking, work hand in hand with each other to create the productivity zapping cycle known as the dopamine loop. The wanting (dopamine) propels you into action and the liking (opioid) makes you feel satisfied.

The problem is, your wanting system is more powerful and less satiable than your liking system.

Every time your phone chimes, dopamine piques your curiosity and starts you seeking. Then you get biologically rewarded for that seeking, which makes you seek even more. Over time, the reward cannot be great enough to satisfy the craving to check your phone to see if you have a new text, email, like, notification or whatever it may be. As with any of life's addictions, this dopamine loop can be significantly more powerful than your human gift of self-control.

## **2. We are Pavlov's dogs.**

Dopamine can be triggered simply by the many sounds your phone uses to alert you, or any cue that you've come to associate with pleasure. You hear your phone ding or buzz and it immediately sets off the reflex to check (dopamine loop). If your phone is incessantly alerting you throughout the day the addiction to keep seeking is heightened.

## **3. Anticipating "The Liking" makes it even more difficult to focus.**

Even thinking about your phone potentially buzzing will distract you from the task at hand. Once the buzz does come through, even if you are self-disciplined enough to keep it at bay, the simple fact that you are aware of something waiting for you is enough distraction to make your performance suffer.

#### **4. Curiosity killed the cat and your focus.**

Your mind will always pay attention to new stimuli over whatever you are immersed in.

Gloria Mark explains that our brain has this bias towards novel things. As such, our ability to sustain adequate levels of attention and concentration is easily toppled by anything new. So that ding or buzz we hear (and the association we have to it) works on us the same way a shiny new toy works on a baby. According to Mark, “humans will work just as hard to obtain a novel experience as we will to get a meal or a mate.” The end game is an ongoing battle between the part of our brain which desires the rewards from staying on task, and our brain’s novelty centre, that is continuing to search out the latest updates from our various apps.

#### **5. We seek to minimize pain and maximize pleasure.**

It was not so long ago that when you left the office you were unreachable. Our ever-demanding and connected world has given rise to the expectation of 24/7 accessibility. We have quickly learned to associate that buzz or beep with urgency and/or importance. Thus, not checking the phone can potentially

cause anxiety, for fear our boss or whomever urgently needs to communicate something very important to us.

As humans, we will do anything to minimize pain (discomfort and anxiety) and maximize pleasure (the dopamine loop). The insatiability of the dopamine loop is sometimes the lesser of two evils.

Our brains and the addictive qualities of the dopamine loop are tough to counteract. There was a time, however, before the buzzes and dings when we had more self-control (well, some of us). There wasn't the need for families to implement "tech free dinners." We made eye contact instead of screen contact. These are all learned behaviors and learned behavior can be unlearned. Just like riding a bike, it can come back.

**Here are a few things you can do to regain self-control:**

**Set some boundaries:** If you don't have to be on 24/7 then don't be on 24/7. If you always respond in the moment then the world expects things from you in the moment. Set some boundaries to shape other people's expectations that you are not accessible 24/7.

**In case of emergency:** Tell the people in your personal and professional life to call if there is an emergency versus text or email. That way you'll know it's necessary to pick up.

**Re-adjust your settings:** When you are working and need to focus, put your phone upside down and turn off the dings, beeps and buzzes on all devices. This is the only way you can stop the

dopamine loop. You are not a rat in a cage so stop letting your technology force you to act like one.

**Check at scheduled times.** If you are working on a task, shut everything else off. Start with 5 minutes and build to 10 and so on. Just like training for a marathon, small wins and small goals help you stay on track.

**Take a tech detox.** Just for a day or two. It resets the system and you learn that life goes on without Facebook. You may even find that you can have a great face-to-face conversation again!

**Get the SelfControl App.** This app blocks access to email and certain websites for a pre-determined period of time. Fortunately for us junkies, the block cannot be deactivated until that time expires.

**Do it because you care about other people.** Just like second-hand smoke is harmful to those around you, so is second-hand beeping and buzzing. Just hearing a beep or buzz, yours or someone else's, can zap productivity.

My phone is telling me I have to end this here so good luck. You can overcome this productivity zapper!

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