

The Stress of Constantly Checking Your Phone¹

Between texts, emails, an increasing array of social media options and other apps, most of us have smartphones now, and most of us are more tied to them than perhaps we should be. While it used to be considered rude to check your phone when out to dinner or otherwise engaged with people in real life, constant phone-checking has become more and more commonplace.

- *According to a survey from the American Psychological Association (APA), constantly checking your smartphone has been linked with stress.*

The APA's annual *Stress in America Survey* was released in two parts in 2017, with the first section focusing on coping with change and the second installment focusing on the stress of technology and social media. There are several findings that are interesting and relevant to most of us. It is clear that technology and the use of social media is affecting our stress levels, happiness, and wellbeing. One of the most salient findings is that many of us check our phones too often, and this is linked to higher levels of stress. Here are more details on this, and on other important aspects of the survey.

Most of Us Have Smartphones Now

According to the survey, *we are connected*:

- 74% of Americans own an internet-connected smartphone,
- Additionally, 55% own a tablet, and
- Roughly nine in 10 have a computer.

Social Media Use Has Skyrocketed

While only 7% of adults in America used social media in 2005 (remember MySpace?), a full 65% were connected to social media in 2015. Young adults (18-29) are even more connected, with fully 90% connected via social media in 2015 (compared to 12% in 2005). The numbers are trending upward as social media is connecting us more and more.

In 2016, of adults who were online, 79% were connected to Facebook, making it by far the most popular social media platform among adults in America. Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn were used by 32%, 31%, and 29%, respectively. Twitter is slightly less popular, but almost one in four (24%) use it nonetheless. Again, we are connected!

'Constant Checking' Is Becoming Common

While this is a relatively new phenomenon, this rise in use of social media and internet-connected devices has led to many people habitually checking their phones for texts, email, and social media posts. What was once perhaps a way to pass time while waiting in line or a way to remain on top of emergencies at work has now become a habitual behavior that many of us perform without thinking.

- According to the survey, 43% of Americans report that they constantly check their phones!

The Association With Stress

Almost one in five (18%) report that technology use is a very or somewhat significant source of stress. Also interesting is the fact that those who constantly check their phones are more likely to find technology to be somewhat or significantly stressful—23% versus 14% of non-checkers. There are several reasons for this:

- **Political and Cultural Discussions:** More than two-fifths of frequent phone-checkers (42%) report that political discussions and cultural disagreements on social media cause them stress, compared to 33% of those who aren't considered constant checkers. This is understandable, considering that conflict is a stressful experience for most people, and engaging in a conflict-laden environment more often may lead to more stress.
- **Effects on Health:** Poorly managed stress has been linked to several negative health outcomes, and previous surveys have found that many Americans are concerned by the effects of stress on their health. This survey was no different: 42% are concerned about the negative effects of social media on their physical and mental health (compared to 27% of non-checkers). This is probably a valid concern, as it has been found that social media social comparison is linked with decreased happiness and wellbeing, and increased levels of stress as well. And unmanaged stress can take a toll on health in multiple ways.
- **Feeling Disconnected:** Ironically, those who check social media the most tend to be those who feel the least connected. 44% of constant checkers report feeling disconnected from their family and friends even when they are with them. (This is compared to only 27% of non-checkers who feel this way.) They attribute this feeling to be the result of technology. Interestingly, however, instead of unplugging, 35% of phone-checkers report that they are less likely to get together with friends or family in person because of the availability of social media. (By comparison, only 15% of non-checkers report the same.) Loneliness can also take a toll on health and happiness, as loneliness has its own dangers and can even be considered "contagious." This connection has created a real disconnect.

To Unplug or Not to Unplug?

A majority of us (65%) agree ("somewhat" or "strongly") that taking a digital break, or "unplugging" from time to time is important for mental health. Again, somewhat ironically, only 28% of those who believe in the importance of this type of cutting back report actually doing so. The reasons behind this are somewhat complicated.

In addition to mere habit, there are benefits to social media that are particularly felt by Millennials. Within that group, 36% say that social media has helped them to cultivate their identity in some way, though roughly half (48%) also worry about the negative effects on their physical and mental health, compared to only 15% of "Matures," 22% of Baby Boomers, and 37% of Gen X-ers.

Currently, we are trying to at least set limits on our constant phone-checking. In the survey, 28% (and 32% of parents) report banning the use of phones during dinner, which is a nice way to practice more mindful eating and connect with those around us. People also report turning off social media notifications (19%), though there are other ways to cut down as well.

How to Stop Constantly Checking Your Phone

People are on the right track. Limiting use of phones at dinner is a simple way to take a small break from social media availability and focus on the people you are with in real life.

Turning off notifications is a good idea as a way to avoid constant reminders that someone, somewhere, has said something that may require our attention and remove it from the people who are in front of us.

This can also be a way to practice limiting use at other times, as you become more used to having your phone turned off or in another room. Here are some additional strategies that can work:

- **Go Offline at Certain Times of Day:** If you create windows when you are not available (like dinnertime, after a certain time of night, or even every other hour), you begin to teach yourself how to limit your availability. You also teach others not to expect you to be constantly available. This small boundary may make it easier to disconnect at other times and in other ways.
- **Become Comfortable with "Sleep Mode":** Putting your phone on "sleep mode" and only checking it once an hour is a good way to keep notifications functional but silent, so you can choose when to let them interrupt your day. This puts you in greater control.

- **Ask People to Call You On It:** Enlist help by announcing that you'd like to check your phone less when you are with people. You can even make a pact with others that none of you will be on your phones when you are together, as in "olden times" (like 2005). This can help you to stay connected with those you're with, and make it into a game of sorts, rather than something you try to do alone.
- **Delete Your Apps:** If you delete social media apps on your phone, you'll be forced to only use them when you are at your computer or tablet. This makes it more challenging to maintain a mindless habit of checking your phone, but it doesn't cut you off entirely. The idea is to make yourself think about it more, and to make social media less available—but not completely inaccessible.
- **Try Meditation:** Because checking your phone can be such an insidious habit, it's easy to do it without thinking. Getting into a new habit like meditation can help you to become more conscious of the present moment, the here and now. That can also help you to get into the practice of *being* here, now, rather than wondering who else is saying something online. Practice being fully present, and it will become easier to keep your phone in your pocket.

ⁱ Scott E. (March 28, 2020). The stress of constantly checking your phone. Accessed from Verywell Mind, Coronavirus News Online, <https://www.verywellmind.com/work-from-home-motivation-4802480>