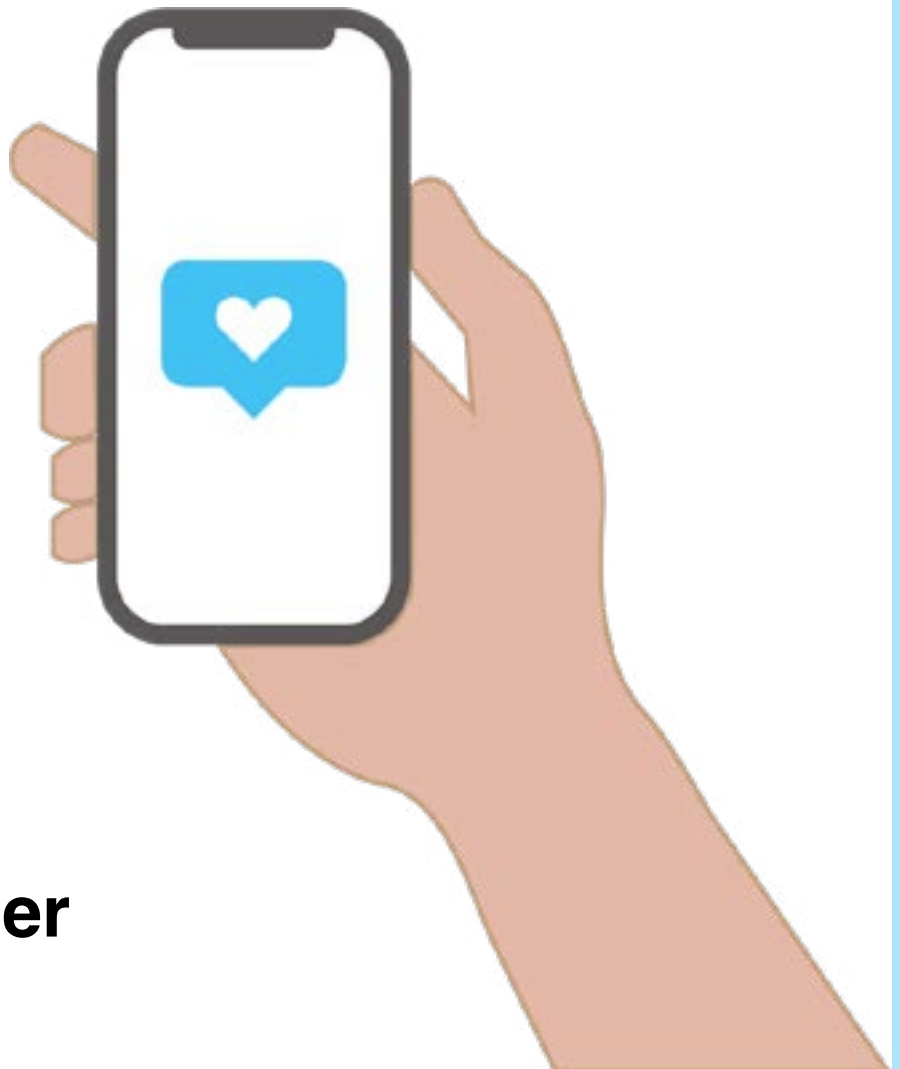


# Breaking Free:

Taking a Break From Technology  
& Putting Your Mental Health  
and Well-Being First



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## An Introduction

Smartphones affect our lives on a daily basis, and they are causing users to form serious addictions to them. [Technology insiders are beginning to speak out](#) on the severity of the situation and stating that users should be concerned about the developments that are being made. Technology is being incorporated into educational strategies as teachers and students were required to adjust to an online learning environment due to the coronavirus pandemic. Navigating a technological landscape is quickly becoming a necessary skill that employers of all kinds are looking for in potential employees. Though technology can provide benefits in an educational and professional landscape, it is also resulting in longer periods of screen time, and increased levels of multitasking that can prove to have detrimental effects on productivity.

Social media plays a major role in this conversation. Program designers and developers are working alongside neuroscientists to understand users on a neurological level. The goal is to insert their hooks into users and keep them returning to use their product. Developers use a type of classical conditioning on users to provide them with the content that their brains crave in order to keep them returning to use the product. Mobile apps have never been so addicting, and they are only going to become worse as time goes on. However [social media has been shown to cause negative effects](#) on productivity, stress and anxiety levels, sleep patterns, and mental health.

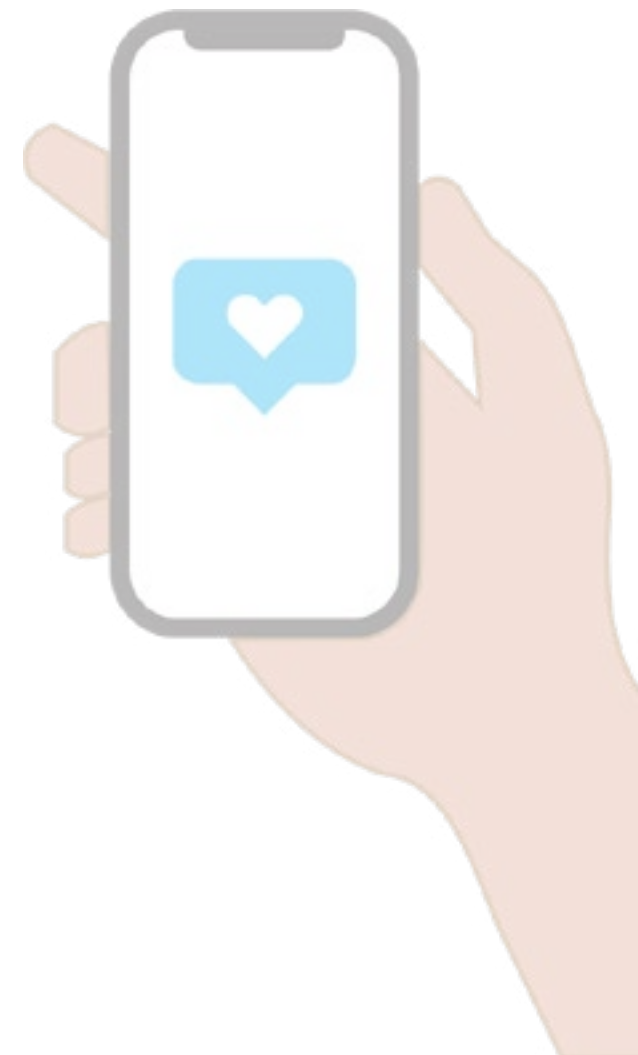
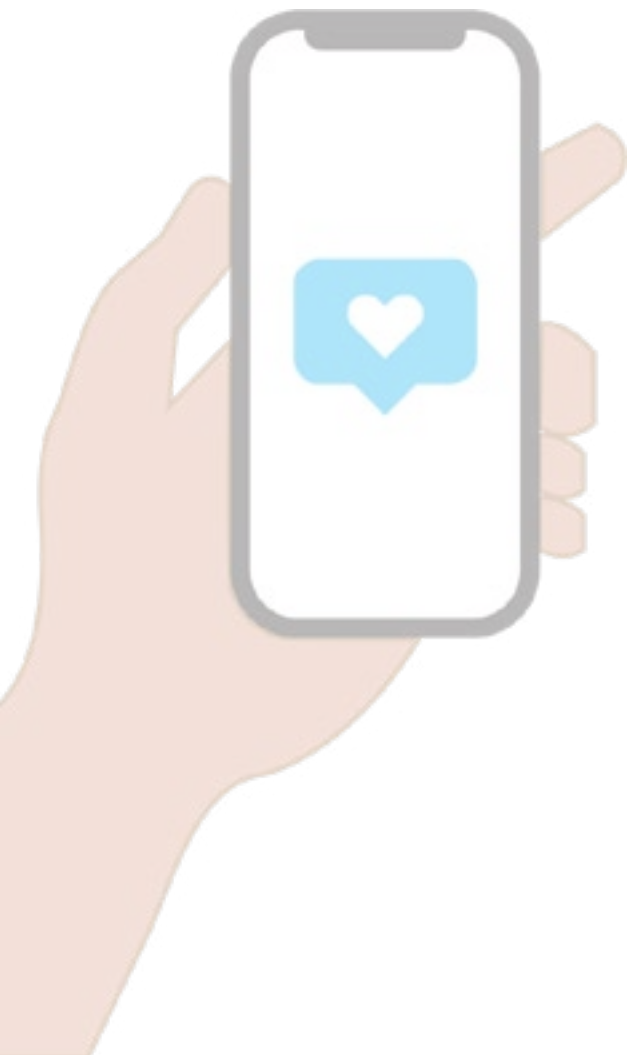
It is no secret that the developments among smartphones and social media are making changes throughout all of society, and that is not always a good thing. Large corporations are not considering the mental health and overall well-being of their users. We are simply the means by which they make their money. Throughout this paper, the negative effects of smartphones and social media will be examined and the solution of “breaking free” will be defined. These effects do not have to be permanent, it is possible to change our mindset and reverse the effects.


Times are changing, everywhere you look there is someone on their smartphones. They were first adopted in the early 1990s, but by 2018, [95% of American adults used them](#). They are a defining factor of the current generation. It is common to carry one with you everywhere you go and panic when you can't find it. Smartphones are our lifelines. They keep us connected to one another, and most of our lives are now lived through social media. Where they were once spent with loved ones and time outdoors, the majority of our days today can be spent scrolling mindlessly through our different social media platforms, trying to stay up to date with what our friends are up to, the newest gossip, and what is going on in politics. But have you ever thought about how hard it would be to give that up? The reality of the situation is that we have developed serious addictions to smartphones and social media, and may not even be aware of it.

The companies behind the social media apps that you love are doing everything they can to manipulate your behavior, and keep you coming back. The more often you use their app, the more money they get in their pockets. Consider your timeline to be a slot machine. Every time you refresh that feed, you are pulling the lever to the slot machine in hopes of winning the jackpot with new content. Chances are, you will keep coming back to the slot machine, and will continue to pull the lever. That is what the casino wants you to do because they profit from every pull. This [casino-like design](#) also leaves you with a decreased attention span after extended periods of time. Your brain will be so accustomed to being fed new stimuli so quickly, that you will not be able to maintain focus on a basic activity. Have you discovered how [difficult it is to maintain focus on reading](#), and retaining the information that you have read after spending all day on social media? These developers will use the data they have collected from your usage, to manipulate your behavior and make you [dependent on their product](#). They profit off of your [eyeball minutes](#), also known as the time you spend interacting with and scrolling through their app.

The developers of these apps are working alongside neuroscientists in hopes of understanding their users' decision-making processes from a neurological level. They use data collected from studies in neuroscience to understand the best ways to go about manipulating user behaviors. These developers are also able to understand what stimuli need to be presented, in order to evoke the desired response

## The Problem





in a user. Large tech companies understand that not all users are the same, but they rely on the idea of users having a [collective personality and being generally social beings](#). When they are developing algorithms and designing content, it is simpler and more time and cost-effective to design for an ideal user, rather than an entire audience. However, with the concept of collective personality growing rapidly, our individuality is being erased as a result. As all users respond similarly to the same content, there is no variety or individuality. Developers are able to thrive with this idea.


Not only are these large tech companies attempting to learn our brain activity and patterns, but they are also tracking the data our usage is creating. Have you ever gone to a pet store to pick up food for your dog, then later that night received an advertisement for a PetSmart on your social media timeline or experienced something similar? This is a common occurrence. It occurs as a result of your location data being sold to third-party companies, which is particularly concerning. When these companies receive your data, they use it to push targeted advertisements to your phone based on places you have recently visited. Your location data is private information, and some people may not want their location to be shared with other companies. Consider someone who attends [Alcoholics Anonymous meetings or therapy sessions](#), they may want to keep that information private. Your privacy is not a concern to these large tech companies. These advertising companies have grown to be worth over [31 billion dollars in 2018](#) as the targeted advertisements have proved to be so effective.

Smartphones and social media are also known to have detrimental effects on mental health. They cause increased stress and anxiety levels, negative ideas of body image, feelings of loneliness, feeling left out, and high levels of depression. Although these may be terrible side effects of social media usage, they do not keep people from coming back. The more time an individual spends on social media, the more likely they are to report feelings of unhappiness and symptoms of depression. When young girls are constantly shown images of swimsuits and runway models, it is common they develop a negative body image of themselves as they think that they are supposed to look like those models. The negative idea of body image is also commonly responsible for a variety of different eating disorders that young girls develop as they attempt to

become like the models they see on social media. Feelings of loneliness stem from everything being shared on social media. When a group of friends gets together and posts about it, the individual that was not invited becomes painfully aware of it. This results in [increased feelings of loneliness and feeling left out](#). As a result of negative effects on mental health, about [four times as many Americans are taking antidepressants](#) to treat severe levels of depression compared to the 1990s.

Teenagers are affected the worst of all groups by smartphones and social media use. Today's generation of teens knows no life outside of technology. Their baby photos are not printed but are digital, smartphones were a part of everyday life throughout their childhood, and computers were incorporated into their education. Most teens received a smartphone of their own at a young age and had access to social media by the age of 13. As a result, most of them do not spend time with friends but rather communicate over their electronics. However, the teens who use social media more often than engaging in social activities [increase their risk of depression by 27 percent](#). Although it is generally common knowledge that smartphones and social media have resulted in increased levels of depression among teens, it does not keep them away. They are so prevalent in their daily lives, that they have to continue to use them to stay connected with their friends. They share information about their daily lives and activities with their friends as a way of communicating. Disconnecting from social media means they have to disconnect from their friends.

If we do not break free from this addiction, there will be a severe reliance on technology and smartphones among the entire population in the future. Communication skills will slowly begin to disappear due to a lack of face-to-face interaction. Overall, society will become too dependent on their smartphones and will eventually not know how to function in a world without them.



# How Did We Get Here?

Though it has negative effects, social media was not inherently bad from the beginning, it has evolved to become the way we know it. The drastic change came in 2012 following the Great Recession from 2007 to 2009. Following this historic milestone, the number of Americans who owned a smartphone exceeded [50 percent](#). With the growing popularity of the smartphone in everyday households, the generation born between 1995 and 2012, also referred to as [iGen](#), became accustomed to the development of technology throughout their childhood and adolescent life. When the iPhone was presented to the world, in 2007, the oldest members of iGen were beginning their adolescent development, and when the iPad was presented, in 2010, they were starting high school. In [a 2017 survey](#) it was found that out of 5,000 American teens, 75 percent owned an iPhone. Smartphones have been becoming increasingly prevalent in daily life as everything is conforming to the technological landscape.

As smartphones entered their lives, other aspects were sacrificed.

Today's teens are missing out on things like:

- Going out on dates and building relationships
- Getting their driver's license while in high school
- Working a part-time job while in school
- Going to parties and getting together with friends

Compared to the generation of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, iGen is seemingly missing out on defining experiences throughout their adolescence and high school lives. In 2015 only approximately [56 percent](#) of high school students went out on dates, compared to the 85 percent of Boomers and Gen Xers. Smartphones play a large role in the different stages of forming a relationship among today's teens. Rather than communicating in person, they are able to simply send a text, Snapchat, or direct message (DM) to a person they are interested in, and develop their relationships through technological means, which results in a lower number of actual dates. [25 percent](#) of iGen teens finished high school without receiving their driver's license, whereas nearly all Boomers had theirs by graduation. Getting your driver's license has always been a defining moment in a teen's life. It provides a new kind of independence that they may not have always had. However, because most teens are able to communicate with friends from home on their smartphones, they do not always feel the need to get their license as they have always had a different kind of

independence. Additionally, in the mid-2010s only [55 percent](#) of teenagers worked for pay during their school year, compared to the 77 percent of Boomers. It is common to believe as the education system develops further, that teens are becoming busier and busier with their schoolwork so they do not have time to keep a job and finish their schoolwork. However, [today's teens are spending much less time on homework](#) than Gen Xers did in the early 1990s. Smartphones and social media provide these teens with a universal type of distraction that keeps them occupied and away from getting their homework done. The massive amounts of screen time for iGen has caused detrimental effects on their mental health. Teens that spend more than three hours a day on their smartphones have a [35 percent increase](#) in the risk of suicide factors. Teens are spending less time with friends, and more time by themselves. This resulted in the teen suicide rate being higher than the teen homicide rate in 2011 for [the first time since 1987](#). But why is there such a severe increase in mental illness and suicide rates among teens? Our smartphones keep us connected 24/7, which is both a blessing and a curse. While you are able to see what your friends are up to while you are away, you are also able to see what exactly you are missing out on and what get-togethers you weren't invited to. [48 percent](#) more of teen girls reported that they felt left out in 2015 than they did in 2010. Only [27 percent](#) more of teen boys reported that they felt left out in 2015 than they did in 2010. It has been shown that girls use social media more often than boys do, which results in a greater percentage that feels left out. This feeling has proved to have detrimental effects on the mental health of young teens. In [a similar study](#) that compared responses from 2013 to 2015, it was found that depressive symptoms in teen girls increased by 50 percent, while teen boys only increased by 21 percent. However, this increase in mental illness has lead to higher rates of suicide. From [2007 to 2015](#), the suicide rate among teen girls tripled and the suicide rate among teen boys doubled.

Though teenagers face the majority of the brunt of the conversation against smartphones and social media, research has shown that American adults have also increased their usage. From 2005 to 2019 the amount of Americans using social media increased from [5 to 72 percent](#). The average Facebook user spends nearly [6 hours a week](#) on the app, and most Facebook users are over the age of 34 years old. While smartphones and social media have developed and severely affected today's teens and iGen most significantly, nobody is safe from the addicting clasp that these platforms have on their users.



## A Solution

Separating yourself from your smartphone may seem like a daunting task. Most people can not go anywhere without and have feelings of panic and anxiety when they do not have it with them. Some people need to keep theirs on as a part of their job requirements. However, it is important to create healthy boundaries to limit your smartphone usage. But where do you start? Consider adopting the time block methodology, the light phone philosophy, or a combination of both.

The simple act of scheduling can provide necessary breaks from smartphone and social media use. Use a scheduling system to break up your day [into blocks](#). Set aside certain time blocks where you allow yourself to use your smartphone, and times where you will go without it. In the time blocks where you enable yourself to use your smartphone, you can use it as you normally would. You can scroll on social media, visit different websites, play games, etc. However, in the time blocks where you do not allow yourself to use your smartphone, you have to refrain from even picking up your phone. These blocks can be as long as you want them to be, and as far apart as you need them to be depending on how much of a necessity your smartphone is in your lifestyle. However, it is important that you stay true to your blocks away from your smartphone, and resist the urge to pick it up. If you are completing a task that requires you to check your smartphone, keep yourself from breaking away from your scheduled block and attempt to focus on something else. The more often you successfully resist this urge, the easier it will become to ignore it. Some individuals are required to use their smartphones for a number of different reasons. To keep in touch with a babysitter, to be on-call for work, or to answer important emails. That is all okay, and there is nothing saying you have to completely abandon your smartphone for good and completely log out of your online presence. Someone with similar circumstances may just have a larger number of time blocks throughout their day, with shorter amounts of time between them. However, someone who does not need to use their smartphone very often throughout their daily lives may have a smaller number of time blocks with a larger amount of time between them. This method is completely customizable to your personal lifestyle and is effective if done with integrity.

You could also develop the practice of the [Light Phone](#). A light phone is a phone that only performs its most basic tasks, making and receiving phone calls and text messages, no social media, no surfing the web, no

checking the weather or the news. However, this requires significant amounts of discipline to stay away from the alluring applications you have on your phone. There are apps such as [Light Phone](#) developed by Daniel Clough that are made to block unnecessary apps from your phone when it is in light phone mode. When it is turned on, the only function it is able to perform is making and receiving phone calls. Some individuals may even choose to buy and use the most basic of flip phones to ensure their practice of the light phone philosophy. They will put their smartphones away in a safe place, and only use their old-school phone for a set amount of time. By adopting this methodology you disconnect yourself from the constant distractions that your phone provides you with, and gain back a lot of your attention that you had previously lost.

A combination of both practices is also possible. You could schedule blocks of time when you are allowed to indulge in all that your smartphone and social media have to offer, but in your time blocks away from the internet you could use the light phone philosophy to use the most basic functions of your smartphone just to conduct necessary communication. A bit of experimentation may be required to find the right balance of these practices that work best with your lifestyle, but the end result will be worth all of the time and effort put into figuring out this practice.

When you create a healthy separation from your smartphone and social media, you will experience a variety of benefits.

These benefits include but are not limited to:

- Increased Attention Span
- Improved Mental Health
- Better Sleep Habits

There is a sense of freedom that comes from eliminating the mental obligation to check your phone every fifteen minutes or so. Though it is likely to still experience a small sense of desire to check your phone, resisting this urge provides you with intense amounts of concentration that allows you to shift your focus to more important tasks at hand.

## The Benefits

Not only will you have more attention to complete basic tasks, but you will also have more to give to those closest to you. You will notice that you get more out of spending time with loved ones when you are not staring at your phone screen for the majority of the time you spend with them. Your levels of anxiety associated with FOMO (fear of missing out) will also decrease as you will not be checking into social media as much, and will not miss monitoring what your friends are up to at all hours.

Your mental health will also improve, as you take it more into account when you separate yourself from social media and your smartphone. You will not experience as many symptoms of depression or feelings of loneliness. When you step away from social media you will no longer be bombarded with depressing news stories, stressful political statements, or arguments among friends and family members. As you disconnect yourself from this virtual existence you will begin to notice all of the positive effects of your day-to-day life. You will be able to focus more on what you have than what you don't have. The less time you spend on social media the more time you spend prioritizing your own mental health and well-being.

You will also adopt better sleep habits, as you will no longer feel the obligation to check in every night before bed, and accidentally end up scrolling for hours. When you use your smartphone before bed, the blue light that is emitted from it will keep your brain active, and keep you awake for a longer period of time resulting in having difficulties falling asleep.

If the majority of people in society were to adopt a similar approach, we would have an easier time coming together to solve [major social issues](#). When everyone's attention is being divided into several different directions all at the same time, it is difficult to come together to figure out a potential solution to these issues. We tend to think of new content, stories, and information as [shiny objects](#) that distract us from the task at hand.

In conclusion, it is important to understand the severity of your addiction to your smartphone and social media for the sake of your wellbeing. Large technology companies and developers are not taking your overall well-being and mental health into account, so it is crucial that you do it for yourself. You do not have to completely disconnect yourself or delete your online profile, simply incorporating a healthy practice of resisting the urge to pick up your phone every time you feel the urge to can benefit you. Limiting your screen time and creating healthy boundaries with social media can greatly improve your mental health. Consider the fact that the more time you spend on the app, the more money the company makes. They are depleting your mental health and attention span to expand their network. Put away your phone and take some time to yourself, you will not regret it.

## In Conclusion



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