How to Break Up With Your Phone

By Catherine Price

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The moment I realized I needed to break up with my phone came just over two years ago. I had recently had a baby and was feeding her in a darkened room as she cuddled on my lap. It was an intimate, tender moment — except for one detail. She was gazing at me … and I was on eBay, scrolling through listings for Victorian-era doorknobs.

I'm not going to try to explain this particular personal passion. The point is that a good 15 minutes had probably passed before I finally caught sight of my daughter looking at me, her tiny face illuminated by my phone's blue light. I saw the scene as it would have looked to an outsider — her focused on me, me focused on my phone — and my heart sank. This was not the way I wanted things to be.

An increasing number of us are coming to realize that our relationships with our phones are not exactly what a couples therapist would describe as "healthy." According to data from Moment, a time-tracking app with nearly five million users, the average person spends four hours a day interacting with his or her phone.

I still wanted to use my phone when it was helpful or fun. But I wanted a *new* relationship with it — one with better boundaries, and over which I had more control. I spent the next year and a half researching habits, addiction, behavior change, mindfulness and neuroplasticity, and developed a comprehensive strategy for how to "break up" with my phone. The goal wasn't to never use my phone again; it was to create a sustainable relationship that felt healthy.

Two years later, I feel that I've succeeded. Here are some of the key things I learned on how to navigate a successful breakup and create a better relationship with your phone.

Reframe the way you think about it

Many people equate spending less time on their phones with denying themselves pleasure — and who likes to do that? Instead, think of it this way: The time you spend on your phone is time you're *not* spending doing other pleasurable things, like hanging out with a friend or pursuing a hobby. Instead of thinking of it as "spending less time on your phone," think of it as "spending more time on your life."

Ask yourself what you want to pay attention to

Our lives are what we pay attention to. When we decide what to pay attention to in the moment, we are making a broader decision about how we want to spend our time. The people who design apps desperately want our attention, because that's how they make money. Have you ever wondered why so many social media apps are free? It's because advertisers are the customers — and your attention is what's being sold. So ask yourself: What do *you* want to pay attention to?

Set yourself up for success

Create triggers that will remind you of your goals and make it easier to live up to them. If you want to spend more time reading, leave a book on your bedside table. If you want to cook more, lay out a shopping list for that recipe you're eager to try. Set up a charging station for your phone that's not in your bedroom, and buy a stand-alone alarm clock.

On the flip side, avoid triggers that will set you up for failure. Delete social media apps from your phone. (Use the clunkier browser versions instead.) Disable notifications, including those for email. (I allow only those from phone calls, text messages and my calendar.) Establish a rule — for yourself and your family — of not keeping phones on the table during meals.

Create speed bumps

It's amazing how often we pick up our phones "just to check" then look up 20 minutes later wondering where the time has gone. I call these "zombie checks," and they're nearly guaranteed to be unsatisfying or make you feel like you're wasting your life.

One solution is to create "speed bumps": small obstacles that force you to slow down and make sure that when you do check your phone, it's the result of a conscious choice. Put a rubber band around your phone as a physical reminder to pause, or set a lock screen image that asks you to confirm that you really want to proceed.

Pay attention to your body

When you notice that you're in the midst of a phone spiral, ask yourself: What's your posture like? How's your breathing? Is whatever you're doing on your phone making you feel good? Do you *want* to be using it right now? The more tuned in you are to your own experiences in the moment, the easier it will be to change your behavior.

Practice trial separations

Leave your phone at home while you go for a walk. Stare out of a window during your commute instead of checking your email. At first, you may be surprised by how powerfully you crave your phone. Pay attention to your craving. What does it feel like in your body? What's happening in your mind? Keep observing it, and eventually, you may find that it fades away on its own.

Use technology to protect yourself from technology

Time-tracking apps like Moment, Quality Time and (OFFTIME) will measure how much time you're spending on your screen. (Be prepared to be horrified.) Freedom and Flipd let you block your access to problematic apps and websites when you want to take a break (Flip'd also lets you create friendly challenges with other people to see who can spend the most time offline.) Apple now has a "Do Not Disturb While Driving" mode that sends customizable automated text message responses so that you can step away from your phone without worrying that you'll leave someone hanging. Lilspace does the same for Android, and displays a timer on your lock screen showing you how much time you've managed to stay unplugged (a strangely motivating feature).

Use the sight of other people on their phones as a reminder of your own intentions

Right now, the sight of someone else pulling out his or her phone on the elevator probably makes you want to check yours as well. But with practice, you can transform this into a cue for a new, healthier habit. When I see other people reach for their phones, I try to use it as a cue to take a deep breath and relax. (I'm successful *most* of the time.)

Get existential about it

If all else fails, consider your own mortality. How many people on their deathbeds do you think are going to say, "I wish I'd spent more time on Facebook"? Keep asking yourself the same question, again and again and again: This is your life. How much of it do you want to spend on your phone?

Catherine Price is the author of "How to Break Up With Your Phone: The 30-Day Plan to Take Back Your Life."