

# Cellphones, revisited again and again – Part I

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**A**s a clinical psychologist who thinks about the overwhelming impact of the smartphone on our society, I'm very distressed. With more people possessing cellphones, having the ability to do more and access so much at any given time, technology has advanced exponentially to the point where we now need to examine the impact of the phone and set guidelines as a society for responsible usage.

In just a few years, the smartphone has intruded into almost every aspect of our lives, for both good and bad, changing the very nature of our human relationships. Who isn't addicted to their phone, leaving it on all day and often at night, checking it multiple times an hour just to see if someone wrote something or if there is something new? How often are friends or family members "last seen" on their phone late into the night, leaving us to wonder whether the phone kept them up or whether they were just up and had to check their phone? Who doesn't go on to their phone to check one thing and find themselves distractedly surfing from one place to another, bored, looking for more and more, then suddenly realizing that they have lost track of time, neglected their partner, job or other responsibilities, have spent hours being non-productive – and if doing all of this while driving, have posed serious safety issues?

Face-to-face and phone communication has diminished markedly. Why bother with a live conversation when texting or tweeting, email or WhatsApp, is easier, faster, sometimes more immediate and often more comfortable? While blurring boundaries, nuance and sarcasm may be harder to "hear," allowing for more frequent miscommunication, it seems a small price to pay for many. When one is actually engaged in a face-to-face conversation, if carrying a phone, its beep, buzz, vibration or jingle is distracting even if one opts to not look at the message. So whether on the phone or simply by carrying it, the cellphone can preclude engaging in conversation, decrease intimacy and ensure that the only thing being "turned on" is the phone itself.

Imagine a wife thinking, "I want to be my husband's cellphone – to be doted on first thing in the morning, tenderly held as soon as he opens his eyes, gazed at lovingly, laughed with, caressed and generally adored. Then I want to travel with him to work, where I can be in his hands for hours, hang out cozily and touched throughout the day. If left behind, I know he'll come back to look for me, devastated that I've been forgotten and that I may be lost. Once home again, I want to be consulted frequently during the evening for my wisdom and jokes, my opinions and ideas. I'll provide passive entertainment whenever he is tired or bored. I'll have his attention and cherish being the last thing touched before saying good night."

It's not exclusive to those who have been married for a long time. Why do young dating couples have their phones visible on the table? Isn't it bad enough that



'ARE WE seeing a new 2019 Tower of Babel?' (TNS)

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they've already checked each other out on Facebook, know which friends they have in common and a myriad of other details through social media before they've even agreed to a first date?

Fast-forward a few years to the young parent who looks to the smartphone as a form of entertainment for both themselves and their child. After all, parenting can get a little boring and in 2019 we "don't do boredom." Youngsters may not receive the consistent attention they need to grow and develop secure attachments to others. Instead, infants and toddlers are often ignored while a parent is "chatting" on the phone, playing a game or checking out the latest Facebook feed. The child seeking attention may be disruptive, because the parent is emotionally available only long enough to discipline. Good behavior often goes unnoticed. The parents' level of empathy, and opportunity for shared language and experience may be quite limited, as they have not been present for

their children in the actual moment. If infants miss age-appropriate attention from their caregivers, we can only wonder what the devastating impact will be on their relationships to others later.

Toddlers learn to "swipe" a phone and with immediate gratification be passively entertained for hours. What has happened to their ability to focus on anything that requires more than fleeting attention? Children of all ages suffer from sensory overload, which has diminished their patience for quiet reading and creative play. What learning takes place? Why read a book, speak in full sentences, or for that matter speak at all? Are family mealtimes, or any time without technology, a thing of the past?

What happens to the nine-year-old girl who suffers from FOMO (a texting abbreviation for "fear of missing out") because she doesn't have a cellphone and her friends are all on WhatsApp making plans? She seems sad, anxious and concerned about her friendships. For better or worse, she's one of only two kids in her class whose parents haven't succumbed to peer pressure. And for those that have phones and other technology, what rules do parents have for controlling screen time? How do parents police what information their children access? The issue of cyberbullying is serious and has led to suicide.

And if our children are not the issue, what about the elderly man sitting in his wheelchair in the park whose caregiver, without looking up, is chatting animatedly with friends on her cellphone for over a half hour in a language that he doesn't understand? How would you feel if this were your parent?

Are we seeing a new 2019 Tower of Babel when partners no longer share a common language, when parents and children disengage from each other, when young children feel left out because they lack instant access to social media and our elderly are ignored? These are just a few examples. The number of visits to just one pornography site last year was over 33.5 billion, with over 100 million visits each day. Who wouldn't rather be passively entertained at any age? We are becoming a society stuck on Facebook and not in real life. Eye contact, so important in giving meaning and words to any relationship, is fleeting and not sustained, and has a huge impact on relationships at all ages and stages of development. Having stopped listening to each other and no longer communicating effectively, each and every one of us has to take ownership of the problem before it is too late.

While clearly smartphones have merit, we need to learn how to moderate their use. Stay tuned – in my next column, I share my thoughts on addressing this problem. ■

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