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Who’s the Boss: You or Your Cell-Phone?

Jim Roberts, PhD

The cell-phone is an indispensable tool in the real estate professional’s tool box. This heavy dependence upon one’s cell-phone, however, can come at a high cost. Let’s be honest with each other. Do you talk, text, or search listings on your cell-phone while driving your car? A brief report by the National Safety Council (NSC) entitled, “The Great Multitasking Lie,” lays to rest the idea that we can operate a 2,000 pound plus motor vehicle and text/talk without placing ourselves and others at risk. Trying to do two or more things at once is often referred to as inattention blindness. Drivers talking on their cell-phones miss as much as 50% of their driving landscape including stop signs, pedestrians, or on-coming traffic. We know we should not do it, yet we continue to do so despite the risk to life and limb. Loss of control is the sine qua non of addiction. Does your cell-phone use also interrupt conversations with friends and loved ones? Have you argued about your cell-phone use with your spouse? Have you tried to cut-back but couldn’t?

Dare I say, you might be addicted to your cell-phone? Do you check your cell-phone every 6.5 minutes and up to 150 times a day? Do you have 6,234 Facebook friends? Or, spend the majority of your waking hours with your cell-phone on your body? If you said “Yes” to any of the above questions, please read the remainder of this article closely.

One does not begin life as a cell-phone addict – it’s a process. The process of addiction begins when a seemingly innocent behavior (shopping, Internet use, exercise, or cell-phone use) becomes harmful and slowly morphs into an addiction (Grover 2011). All behavioral addictions eventually reach a tipping point where the affected individuals can no longer control their cell-phone use and the quality, and even quantity (in the case of texting and driving) of their lives are being undermined. Treatment is more likely to be successful if the behavior in question can be caught before the individual hits his or her tipping point.

Fortunately, we have identified what is considered the six core components of any type of addiction - substance or behavioral (Grover 2011). The six signs of cell-phone addiction include: salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. Please read the description of these six signs that follow and answer the two questions at the end of each description. By the time you’ve completed this task, you will have a better idea of whether you’ve reached your tipping point when it comes to your cell-phone use.
The Six Signs of Cell-Phone Addiction Scale

1. **Salience:** A behavior becomes salient when it is deeply integrated into your daily routine. It is an essential activity that dominates your thinking, dictates your emotions, and plays an important role in your daily routine. Sixty-eight percent of adult Americans sleep with their cell-phone next to their bed, which is causing problems for many whose sleep is being interrupted throughout the night by tweets (not from the birds outside), beeps, vibrations, bells, and whistles that are part of the cell-phone’s irresistibility. In essence, your phone is saying, “You can’t ignore me, I am essential to your happiness and I won’t be ignored.” Answer the following two questions as it pertains to how salient your cell-phone is to your everyday activities.

   A. **Is the first thing you reach for after waking in the morning your cell-phone?**  
      Yes  No

   B. **Would you turn around and go back home if you left your cell-phone at home on the way to work?**  
      Yes  No

2. **Euphoria:** The feeling of anticipation or excitement that precedes and/or follows the use of your cell-phone is a mood modification resulting in euphoria. For a sales professional, it could be your next big sale. Who knows what the beep, buzz, whistle or stylized ring-tone might have in store for you - exciting stuff. An uplifting text from a friend, a funny tweet, or hilarious six-second Vine video, or a racy disappearing Snapshot picture, or a large number of likes to various posts on Instagram, Pinterest, or Facebook can all brighten your day. Please answer the following two questions that ask the role your cell-phone plays in managing your mood.

   A. **I often use my cell-phone when I am bored.**  
      Yes  No

   B. **I have pretended to take calls to avoid awkward social situations.**  
      Yes  No
3. **Tolerance**: Like in drug and alcohol abuse, tolerance addresses the need for an ever-increasing dose of the behavior to achieve the desired high. Research has shown that the longer people had their cell-phones, the more they are likely to use it. The increasing array of functions that can be performed on one’s cell-phone guarantees that our dependence on our cell-phone is likely to increase. Please answer the following two questions as they relate to your cell-phone use.

   **A.** I find myself spending more and more time on my cell-phone.
   - Yes  
   - No

   **B.** I spend more time than I should on my cell-phone.
   - Yes  
   - No

4. **Withdrawal symptoms**: The feelings of irritability, stress, anxiousness, desperation, and even panic that often occur when you are separated from your cell-phone are good examples of withdrawal symptoms. Sixty-eight percent of all adults have an irrational fear of losing their phone. British researchers first coined the term “Nomophobia” (fear of no mobile phone) to describe the fear many of us feel when our cellular umbilical cord is severed for even the briefest of time. How long was it before you replaced your cell-phone the last time you broke it, lost it, or heaven forbid, had it stolen? My guess is not long - the same day if possible. These are the same types of reactions drug users have when separated from their drug of choice. Answer the following two questions as they relate to any type of withdrawal symptoms you may have experienced when separated from your cell-phone.

   **A.** I get agitated or irritable when my cell-phone is out of sight.
   - Yes  
   - No

   **B.** I have gone into a panic when I thought I had lost my cell-phone.
   - Yes  
   - No

5. **Conflict**: A common outcome from addiction to one’s cell-phone is conflict. Does your spouse or children complain that you are always on your phone? Do you allow texts, calls and e-mails to spoil your vacations and personal time? Are your work activities interrupted by playing games, visiting Facebook and other countless forms of entertainment offered via your cell-
phone? Don’t even get me started on calling and/or texting while driving and the havoc that wreaks. Please answer the following two questions as they relate to the conflict created in your life by your cell-phone use.

A. I have argued with my spouse, friends, or family about my cell-phone use.
   Yes  No

B. I use my cell-phone while driving my car.
   Yes  No

6. **Relapse**: When we acknowledge that our cell-phone use may be undermining our well-being, we attempt to stop. But, then we slip back. It’s like any bad habit we might have, say smoking or eating too much, we start a diet, attempt to quit smoking or drinking, only to relapse after a short period of time. It’s like being an alcoholic; you must be constantly vigilant if you want to keep cell-phones from invading every aspect of your life. Have you ever been interrupted by a text or phone call that you just had to answer when having a conversation with a loved one? If you have, you may have crossed the tipping point. Please answer the following two questions as it relates to your attempts to control your cell-phone use.

A. I have tried to cut-back on my cell-phone use but it didn’t last very long.
   Yes  No

B. I need to reduce my cell-phone use but am afraid I can’t do it.
   Yes  No

**Your Cell-Phone Addiction Score**

Well, it’s time to see if you have crossed the tipping point from reasonable cell-phone use to potentially addictive cell-phone habits. To calculate your score, simply add up the number of “Yes” responses to each of the twelve questions of the Six Signs of Cell-Phone Addiction scale.

**Results Key**

8 + “Yes” answers  I will personally make a reservation for you at the Betty Ford Clinic for habitual cell-phone users.

5-7 “Yes” answers  You have crossed the *tipping point* and are moving full-steam ahead to
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full-blown cell phone addiction.

3-4 “Yes” answers  You have not yet reached your tipping point but need to carefully assess how your cell-phone is impacting your life.

0-2 “Yes” answers  You are either living in a monastery or at least have the patience and self-restraint of a monk. Or, technology simply scares you.

If you answered “Yes” to five or more of the questions on the Cell-Phone Addiction scale, it’s still not too late. I prescribe a Digital Detox to help you set healthier boundaries regarding your cell-phone use. There’s no magic cure but with a few simple life-style changes, you can control your cellular life rather than having it control you. It’s about finding a balance.

Try instituting a cell-phone-free meal time. All cell-phones must be off and out of sight. You can even place all cell-phones in a cell-phone “prison” (I bought one at Dillard’s) and set the sentence for one hour or however long you want. No cell-phones until they have served their time. Just maybe you will rediscover the beauty of a leisurely meal and good conversation.

How about no cell-phones after 10:00 p.m.? Give yourself time to decompress before going to bed. The restorative power of a good night’s sleep pays benefits all day long. Set aside a few minutes at night before you go to bed or on your days off to check texts and e-mails but no more - no peeking.

Enlist your spouse, kids, friends, and colleagues to help you stick to your new life-style. Detoxing can be difficult for some but it’s worth the effort. Breaking the wireless chains leaves time for reflection, introspection, solitude, time with others, more exercise and less stress.

References


About the Author

James A. Roberts, PhD
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Dr. Roberts is a well-known author with approximately 75 articles published in the academic literature. He is the Ben H. Williams Professor of Marketing at Baylor University in Waco,
Texas where he has been a faculty member since 1991. His research regularly appears in many of the top marketing and psychology journals and has received two *Paper-of-the-Year* awards.

A primary focus of Dr. Roberts' work over the last 10-15 years has been the psychology of consumer behavior. Somewhat of an anomaly among marketing scholars, his research is largely focused on the *dark side* of consumerism and marketing. Current research efforts focus on the topics of materialism, compulsive buying, credit card abuse and self-control. His book, *Shiny Objects*, takes a careful and amusing look at how our love of material possessions impacts our happiness and what we can do to find true happiness in a culture awash in material possession love. A nationally recognized expert on consumer behavior, Dr. Roberts has been quoted extensively in the media and has appeared on the CBS Early Show, ABC World News Tonight, Yahoo.com's "The Daily Ticker", Time.com, *US News & World Report, New York Times, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal*, National Public Radio, *Cosmopolitan Magazine, Glamour*, and many other newspapers, magazines, websites, and television appearances.