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Time for a Wake-Up Call: Problematic Cell Phone Use in Emerging Adults

by Kaelie Crockett



For many young adults, cell phones have become an essential part of day-to-day life. Among Americans 18 to 25 years old, almost 100% own a cell phone; 94% own a smart phone.¹ Cell phones may cause no disruptions in daily tasks for some people, though for others, the prevalence of cell phones has led to what is being called “problematic cell phone use” or “cell phone addiction.” These conditions are characterized by feeling preoccupied by a cell phone, spending excessive amounts of time or resources on a cell phone or cell phone plan, using a cell phone in socially inappropriate or physically dangerous situations, and exhibiting anxiety when a cell phone cannot be used.² Studies have shown that problematic cell phone use is related to negative outcomes in school,³ sleep,⁴ and friendships.⁵

Recently, a team of BYU researchers took the opportunity to gain a new perspective into the relationship between cell phone use and emerging adults’ mental health. In the study, Sarah Coyne, a School of Family Life professor with her research associates Laura Stockdale and Kjersti Summers, studied how problematic cell phone use impacts adolescents who are transitioning into adulthood. They used data from a three-year study of adolescents between the ages of 17 and 19. In this study, 385 individuals (47% male, 53% female) completed yearly surveys measuring problematic cell phone use, anxiety, depression, self-regulation, and media use time. Surveys from the first year showed that those who had higher levels of depression and anxiety reported higher levels of problematic cell phone use as well. However, this did not allow the researchers to determine if problematic cell phone use led to depression or if those who experienced depression simply used their cell phones more.

Data from the second and third years of the survey helped to clarify this relationship. The researchers noted that a high level of problematic cell phone use in the second year of surveys predicted a high level of depression in the third. Over time, the study participants showed an increase in depression if they engaged in problematic cell phone use.⁶ These results appear to indicate that problematic cell phone use may be a risk factor for depression, though it was not connected to anxiety or self-regulation.

Problematic cell phone use may be particularly risky for these “emerging adults” because the transition to adulthood is a time characterized by exploration, uncertainty, feeling in-between, and future potential.⁷ As teenagers transition into young adulthood and their autonomy increases, their cell phone use habits may become more or less problematic depending on the choices they make. The changes at this time may solidify into lifelong habits.

By choosing to avoid problematic cell phone use, teens and young adults can lower their risk for depression. One way to avoid problematic cell phone use is being intentional about monitoring how they use and feel about their phones.

Many cell phones come with built in features that make monitoring easy. Settings or apps can report the amount of time spent using the phone or certain apps, as well as block apps or websites after a certain time of day or a specific amount of use. Additionally, it is important to build strong social networks which can replace some of the time spent on social media. These friendships may help prevent problematic cell phone use and potentially buffer the associated impact on mental health.⁸

Endnotes

¹ Pew Research Center (2018). Mobile fact sheet. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/mobile/>.

² Merlo, L. J., Stone, A. M., & Bibbey, A. (2013). Measuring problematic mobile phone use: Development and preliminary psychometric properties of the PUMP scale. *Journal of Addiction*, 2013, 1–7. doi:10.1155/2013/912807.

³ Lepp, A., Barkley, J. E., Sanders, G. J., Rebold, M., & Gates, P. (2013). The relationship between cell phone use, physical and sedentary activity, and cardiorespiratory fitness in a sample of US college students. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 10, 79.

⁴ Sahin, S., Ozdemir, K., Unsal, A., & Temiz, N. (2013). Evaluations of mobile phone addiction level and sleep quality in university students. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences*, 29, 913–918. doi:10.12669/pjms.294.3686.

⁵ Sansone, R. A., & Sansone, L. A. (2013). Cell phones: The psychosocial risks. *Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience*, 10, 33–37.

⁶ Coyne, S. M., Stockdale, L., & Summers, K. (2019). Problematic cell phone use, depression, anxiety, and self-regulation: Evidence from a three-year longitudinal study from adolescence to emerging adulthood. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 96, 78–84.

⁷ Arnett, J. J. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Wang, X., Cai, L., Qian, J., & Peng, J. (2014). Social support moderates stress effects on depression. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 8(1), 41. doi:10.1186/1752-4458-8-41