It's OK if you've used your phone too much this year

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*(CNN)*As a tech reporter, I've probably spent too much time with devices over the years, but I always tried to put in place some boundaries: no phone at the dinner table, no checking work Slacks after a certain hour and limiting screen time for my kids.

But this year, to quote a beloved New Yorker cartoon, "I can't remember -- do I work at home or do I live at work?" I went from sneaking work messages on my phone during my son's remote learning class to setting up laptop workstations, like we're co-workers, in the living room. I cringed each Sunday when my iPhone screen time report popped up on my phone: *your average daily screen time was 4 hours and 12 minutes.* How was this possible with a full-time job and two kids?

Beyond the pandemic, and the countless ways it upended our lives, there was also an extraordinary news cycle: protests spreading across the country; a presidential election unlike any other; and news of the virus too. "Doomscrolling" -- or endlessly searching for negative news on social media -- became the norm.

Taken together, it seemed almost impossible to look away screens for very long this year. Even some tech critics struggled with it.

"I've been glued to my phone all year — like so many people," said Joanne McNeil, author of "Lurking: How a Person Became a User." "But this holiday, I'm rolling back my social media and email usage. I delete the Twitter and Instagram apps from my phone after every login, which means I have to download it again if I feel the need to tweet something—this creates a little barrier for me to keep from checking all day long."

Americans averaged about four hours a day on their phone, up from three hours in 2019, according to data from App Annie, an an app analytics firm. And that doesn't include the time we spent glued to a TV screen, or doing online classes and taking meetings on a laptop.

The stats hint at just how integral screens became to our lives in 2020 -- and how much a years-long tech industry effort to moderate time spent on our devices was undermined by an incredibly turbulent year.

Two years ago, some of the same tech giants who built the products that consumed our time reflected very publicly on society's excessive screen time habits. Facebook,

Instagram and Apple rolled out tracking tools to help users, including Tim Cook himself, better avoid the endless scrolling. Tristan Harris, the former Google employee behind the "Time Well Spent" movement, campaigned for people to log off and be more present in their lives.

Then the pandemic forced us to replace much of our offline life with an extremely online one. But psychologists and industry watchers generally offered words of comfort around screen time; it's OK if you or your kid leaned on technology more than usual in 2020.

"While we are in a Covid world, we need to be kind and patient with ourselves with how we're using technology," Alexandra Hamlet, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute in New York City, told CNN Business. "We may not have preferred to be online as much as we are but that may be the reality we have to accept to get through each day."

In many ways, technology helped us through 2020. We FaceTimed with friends and relatives we couldn't see; Zoomed into funerals and weddings; conferenced with coworkers; ordered groceries and household supplies from the stores we no longer visit; livestreamed concerts to feel human again; and managed our kids' remote education.

The blurred lines between work and home life had the potential to yield some unforeseen benefits, according to Hamlet. Some parents witnessed how their kids learn and socialize with their peers and teachers through online instruction, children perhaps developed a deeper understanding of their parents' work and spouses may have become more sensitive to how their partners are navigating both roles. Even colleagues got a unique glimpse into the homes and personal lives of the people they work with in a way that wouldn't have happened before, something that could enhance our sense of connectedness in a post-Covid world.

We also found new avenues to connect. Streaming services like Disney+ and Hulu, which experienced exponential growth with millions of people stuck at home, launched watch party features to virtually stream and chat with others in real time. We flocked to games like Fortnite's Battle Royale in part because of its voice chat tool, adding an intimate social component to playing with friends or strangers online. We went to virtual concerts and graduations on Animal Crossing. And some people got TikTok famous for their dance moves during quarantine.

The way we used our phones in 2020 also boosted the entire mobile industry ahead two to three years of where it would be otherwise, according to App Annie, which collects data on how we download apps. We spent $112 billion on app downloads and in-app purchases on the iOS and Google Play stores in 2020, up 25% from last year.

Groceries were placed digitally. We used contactless payments like Apple Pay and favored banking platforms including Zelle and Venmo over ATM and bank visits. We also leaned even more on many of the same Big Tech companies who were already under scrutiny from regulators and the general public for their size and influence. Our

fingers got sore from tapping "Buy Now" too much on Amazon and holding up our phones to FaceTime with friends, family and doctors.

"The pandemic was a theme of divergence," said Sucharita Kodali, a VP principal analyst at Forrester. "When all is said and done, it will be catastrophic but at the same time history will showcase many silver linings: streaming media, telehealth, online servicing, higher savings rates, contactless payments. There were so many beneficiaries."

But just because there were some benefits doesn't mean we want to continue these habits whenever the pandemic finally comes to an end.

To prepare for life after Covid**,** Hamlet suggested we start to pair our technology use with offline activities: Get exercise by going for a walk when you listen to a podcast; turn TikTok binging into a talking point with friends or child; opt for a paperback book instead of reading on a device to give your eyes a break; and consider printing out a document so you can physically hold the material in your hands.

"The transition to post-Covid will take some time and be uncomfortable as we get used to a world that navigates physical boundaries, face-to-face interactions and even commuting," said Hamlet. It's possible, she said, that we'll need to rely on technology even more during the transition. "We are all doing the best we can and will have to get used to things we haven't practiced in the past year -- and that's OK too."