

# “Dad, Put Your Phone Down at the Dinner Table!”, a Daughter-Father Memoir on Smartphone Addiction

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## Abstract

This is a memoir written by a daughter (the first author) and her father (the second author) regarding their struggles with smartphone addiction. In order to be honest with our own perspective, each section was separately written with minimum coordination, but we later found several common themes between the two perspectives: 1) the problem is not limited to a certain age group; 2) each of us strived to find solutions; 3) technology could serve as a distraction from pain which is why it is addictive; and 4) we need a more effective, scalable solution.

## CCS Concepts

• **Social and professional topics** → **Adolescents**; • **Applied computing** → **Psychology**; • **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**.

## Keywords

Smartphone addiction, family communication, memoir

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## 1 The Daughter’s Perspective

Phones are playing a bigger part in today’s world, and as a high schooler, I want to know that there is a solution to stop me from overutilizing my phone before I become fully addicted. However, I find that whatever solutions people come up with to avoid overusing technology (e.g., phone timers and age restrictions) are not effective.

More and more, I am aware of how my time on my mobile devices has increased. After getting a phone without a keyboard and with more apps, it became harder to tear myself away from it. When I had a time limit for social media, I would use it sparingly in an effort to make it last the whole day, most days not even reaching the limit.

\*Both authors contributed equally to this memoir.

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After a few months of this, my mother would take away the timer with the trust that I would not become addicted, but without the constant reminder to cut down my screen time, I would eventually spend way too much time on my devices.

For a while, when I used to spend too much time on social media, I was worried for myself. After all, with both parents connected to the tech world and constantly reminding me of the dangers of chronic screen time, my conscience started to creep up on me and remind me to put down my phone. Sometimes I did, but other times it became too hard to stop scrolling again because I knew that if I stopped scrolling, my homework would be waiting for me. I installed a personal timer on Instagram to stop myself from doom scrolling, but I eventually found it harder and harder to follow. For the first few months, I would quit social media for the day whenever the message came up reminding me of the time I spent, but as I got used to the alert, it ceased to become a stop sign and instead served as a useless clock.

When I finally get myself to put down my phone to do my homework, having it near becomes hard to ignore when I receive messages or when I have to check something. With the excuse of leaving a quick reply, I often go on a tangent for things I do not necessarily have to do but want to do, and I get distracted. It becomes harder to tear yourself away from your devices when you have a lot on your to-do list and you know that it would be so much easier to just scroll on your phone. It is like an escape from having to do your work, which is why it is so addictive.

Sometimes, when I study, I find myself listening to music and checking other things like gmail, messages, the weather, etc. I feel bad about doing this because I know I am not making as much progress as I might without the constant distraction, but the part of me that wants to avoid doing my work is often a lot stronger.

Other than providing an escape, another addictive trait of social media is the fact that before I had Instagram, I failed at having a lot to talk about with my friends. They all had social media platforms that they would visit regularly and spend a lot of time on, so naturally their conversations would stem from that. Without being connected to those platforms, I was constantly missing out on the inside jokes and trends that they were a part of. Now, even though I do not take part in things like dance trends, I at least know what they are referring to when they make jokes. It is not exactly a fear of missing out (FOMO), but it is much easier to come up with topics to talk about when you can all comfortably converse about the same thing.

My parents often remind me to watch over my screen time so that I do not become addicted to it. The only problem is, phone addiction is not limited to teenagers. My parents are frequent phone users as well, especially my father. While most of his screen time

is probably dedicated to work (I do not actually know what he does on his phone), he still spends a considerable amount of time on his devices, even at the dinner table. For this reason, when my parents remind me to put away my phone, I feel a sense of hypocrisy because I think they should try limiting their screen time as well.

While I also have the problem of switching between devices (because each one has a different use to it), I definitely spend the most time on my phone because of how easy it is to take out and take around. I might bring my computer to school, but it is mostly for schoolwork, and it is hard to take it out of my backpack and computer sleeve as casually as I might take my phone out of my back pocket.

These habits are not specific to me, unfortunately. After talking with fellow high schoolers, most of them agree they also feel worried about their screen time, to the point that they have their own ways of trying to limit it. Student A hands her phone over to her parents before sleeping or while doing homework to ensure that she does not get distracted. Student B says that she puts her phone in the grayscale mode before scrolling on social media to discourage herself from spending too much time on it. As colors make content more interesting, the lack of bright hues causes her to get bored more easily and therefore stop scrolling. The problem with this approach is that she often turns off the grayscale to check something that has to be in color (not necessarily on social media) and forgets to turn it back on. She said that she found herself spending so much time on her phone because it was much easier to just keep scrolling when she was tired as opposed to doing something productive. Student B also mentioned that she does not like the idea of parent-enforced screen timers because when her parents set one for her on her phone, she found herself resorting to downloading the app on her computer in secret, where she spent even more time on the app than usual.

When my father and I were studying the art of focus, we came to the conclusion that true focus can only be achieved if the subject is intrinsically motivated. Out of all the teenagers I have talked to, they have all come to the conclusion that this problem with technology addiction can only be solved if they are willing to solve it (I agree with this point as well). They have all mentioned that although social media platforms might put age restrictions on accounts and content and parents may try to regulate screen time, teenagers can always find a way around it if they are willing to look for it.

I want to solve this addiction problem, but I do not know how to do it on my own. During this writing process, I have discovered that my peers feel the same way about their phone addiction problems as I do, but have yet to find a sustainable solution. For our future, I hope to find a way around this universal problem through this experience.

## 2 The Father's Perspective

I admit that I have the issue of smartphone addiction and have difficulties in cutting down my usage of my own smartphone. I spend too much time on Facebook and YouTube, so I have deleted them multiple times, but I have always reinstalled them. I have set the time limit on these apps, which has been ignored multiple times, because they are also necessary in my professional life as well. However, these are all good excuses to reinstall and unset

the time limits on these apps. These problems are more painful when I have important work to do. There have been times I felt miserable after realizing that I wasted 2-3 hours on these addictive apps despite having to work toward a deadline. I felt stressed and lonely because I could not talk about this problem to other people.

I wanted to solve this problem. Here are some of the lessons I have learned:

First, addiction is a problem deeply rooted in the history of humanity. We are talking about smartphones here, but there have been struggles with gambling, alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and pornography throughout history. These problems started early back around 1,000 BCE as “Gambler’s Lament” describes the desire to play a dice [7]. Unfortunately, humanity’s attempts to solve these issues appear to be ineffective. Note that all the addictive substances listed above are still the problems of today. None of them have been effectively eradicated, rather becoming more problematic with time.

Second, the reason that addiction is so common is probably because it is linked with pain. Carl Erik Fisher aptly mentioned, “Those avoidant responses are a kind of self-medication, not in the sense that addiction is the superficial expression of a “deeper” problem, but rather that substance addictions are merely one variant of a universal feature: the way our human psychology sometimes reacts ineffectively to pain.” [3, p.15]. This dualism between dopamine created through addiction and pain was also well described [5]. Such a notion resonated well with my own experience, seeing as I revert back to my smartphone especially when I am under stress. As long as a human is under pain, these addictions will be here with humanity.

Third, compared to other addictive substances, mobile technologies (smartphones and addictive apps) are elusive to control. Smartphones are universal (4.69 - 4.88 billion users depending on sources [4, 6]), so our daily lives are basically inseparable from smartphones. As mentioned above, an addictive app often has the ability to be addictive and productive at the same time, so it is difficult to draw a line between the two. This imposes a unique challenge to the regulation of addictive technologies. Politicians have tried to regulate these technologies, but it has been quite challenging to draw clear boundaries between what should be allowed and what not.

This problem with smartphone addiction becomes even more difficult to tackle when it comes to parent-children relationships. I feel awkward saying something to my daughter about smartphone addiction because I have not solved the problem for myself, either. Despite knowing the dangers of addictive technology, my wife and I reluctantly provide smartphones to our children because they should be able to reach us when they need to be picked up from school. My wife and I also observed that our children’s friendships have built up via Instagram and KakaoTalk, a chatting app widely used in South Korea, so it is challenging for us to force our children to uninstall these apps.

The name of the feature, “Parental Control,” seems to set an improper context around this problem. My wife and I quickly realized that our children are not very controllable. As they grow up, they seem to develop their own sense of privacy and relationships through these apps. My wife can control the time limit on specific apps, but she cannot control what happens within the time limit. I also sensed my daughter was aware of the problem and wanted to

solve it in her own way, so repeatedly mentioning to her how dangerous these social media could be, especially for female teenagers, sounds unhelpful. She seems to know of the dangers already, but she simply cannot solve her problem of staying away from her smartphone, just as I cannot.

Instead, what I am trying to do these days is provide her with something more worthwhile to focus on than her smartphone. In Nir Eyal’s *Indistractable Model* [2]<sup>1</sup>, there are four forces around addictions: Traction, Distraction, External Triggers, and Internal Triggers. I can help my daughter turn off notifications from selected apps (External Trigger) and put screen time limitations (Distraction), but her internal triggers (“Bored. I want to check out Instagram.”) cannot be easily controllable, and we need more traction on her own aspirations. My daughter and I have started to read some books together and have weekly discussions on what we have learned. I do not know whether this really helped her to stay away from her smartphone, but at least we are having more meaningful conversations than before.

I do not know what would be the best solution to this prevalent problem. As a struggling father and smartphone addict, I am looking forward to observing how the research communities have tackled this problem. I also hope that the solution, if there is any, could be scalable and applicable to all the people who are struggling with this problem.

### 3 Final Remarks

Through the process of co-writing this memoir, we better understood each other and learned that our opinions have more similarities than differences. While this problem is seemingly pervasive,

there is no clear solution. However, we believe that acknowledgment of the fact that both parents and children experience smartphone addiction and want to solve the problem is the first step to move away from the traditional notion of “Parent Control.” Then, we can build a more collaborative solution to this problem. This problem will likely stay with us for a long time, just as other addictions have been. We may need to learn how to live with them, instead of getting rid of them. We are looking forward to having constructive and optimistic conversation at the workshop.

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<sup>1</sup>It is ironic that he also wrote a book on how to make an app more addictive [1].

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