

Cell Phone Addiction: A Rising Epidemic

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Estimated users of smartphone are over a 5.6 billion subscribers worldwide,¹ with a growing number and in Pakistan, current users have crossed a 150 million mark. In this age of globalization, smart phones are fore-front in revolutionizing our means of communication and further catalysing the use of social media and other applications.

Why is this becoming a concerning problem? If we are to define "Addiction", then cellphone addiction is defined as a habitual drive to a continuous need to use one's cellphone repeatedly,² providing a pleasurable feeling to its user.

Smartphone dependence is rising in form of an epidemic, affecting all ages. Most users are of age between 21 to 30 years and are more influenced, not to mention that they make upto 77% of smartphone users. Moreover, cell-phone use in adolescents is so important, that some adolescents never switch off their cell phones at night. It has been noted roughly about 27% of young people, between 11 and 14 years of age admit that they never turn off their cell phones,³ a behaviour that increases with age. Notably the amount of time spent with a mobile device is estimated to be more than 10 hours on an average.⁴ Depending on level of addiction to usage of phone, the health of the user is affected on different scales, i.e. physically, mentally and socially.

Consequently, in behavioural terms, the following problematic manifestations have also been noted, especially in mobile phone users, frequently compared to and corroborated by the diagnostic criteria of the DSM-5 criteria. These are few of the signs and symptoms seen in cell phone addiction:

- The need to reach for the phone first thing in the morning and finding it difficult in letting it go off at night.
- Increasing cell phone use and preoccupation with phone: Impacting social life and/ or family time.
- Becoming anxious or agitated when the cell phone

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is out of sight: hence "NO MOBILEPHONEPHOBIA" or Nomophobia.⁵

- Inability to cut back on cell phone use.

As a result of withdrawal from phone, results in all sign and symptoms of withdrawal seen in case of substance abuse addicts, includes: Anger, temper and tantrums [mostly seen in children], depression, feeling of loss, irritability and/or restlessness.

For this reason, a study linked the use of smartphones and the rise in depression and suicide amongst teenagers in recent years. The CDC reported a rise in the rates of both over the years 2010-2015, and found that girls were particularly at risk: Their suicide rate rose by 65% in those five years while the rate of severe depression also rose by 58%. Furthermore, in it was observed a significant relationship between parents' abuse of and dependence on cell phones and consequential addiction in their children to the Internet and other technologies.⁶ Still more work and research is needed in this field. The greatest hindrance to research in cell-phone abuse is the diversity of terms, criteria, and constructs available in the field. In addition, a prudent attitude exists toward the classification of addiction.⁷

In addition to behavioural and mental health issues, physical and psychological problems have reportedly resulted from cell-phone abuse, such as rigidity in spine and muscle pain, ocular afflictions reflected in fatigue, dryness, blurry vision, irritation, or ocular redness, auditory and tactile illusions - the sensation of having heard a ring or felt a vibration of a cell phone, and pain and weakness in the thumbs and wrists leading to an increased number of cases of de Quervain's tenosynovitis.⁸⁻¹²

Therefore, the need of time is to counter these effects, as they have become part of our daily lifestyle. Educating ourselves in doing so and accepting the problem in hand, is only the beginning of solving and finding workable solutions.

For this reason, everyone is required to play their part. Providing early guidelines and setting down rules for younger users is one remedy to use smartphones.

Utilizing time in active and healthier activities, especially when bored, is a better alternative. Developing more socially interactive sessions "offline" with people, and maintaining the good healthy relations with family and friends, not only benefits in reducing stress but keeps depressions and loneliness at bay. Also it is advisable to switch off phones when having meals or doing any group activity. It is important to realize that in cases where a person needs help and support to break their addiction, he/she should be encouraged to always ask for help with social support and medical counselling, to help counter the effects.

In short, it is necessary to broaden the range of analysis in this field from children to the adult population, as well as and to counter the consequences.

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