Opinion



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Breathtakingly, they're stashed everywhere. Hip pockets, front pockets, pocketbooks, school desks, nightstands, dashboards: Smartphones ever ready to be fingered into action.

Walk along a big city sidewalk and you'll need to navigate your way among people not looking where they're going, but intently staring at their smart phones. Get on a bus and well more than half the passengers, sitting or standing, have them out. Go into an elementary, middle school or high school classroom and hear teachers tell their students at the start of class to put away their phones. They will, for a minute. Then out they come, hidden below the desk in adamantine stealth ready to receive or dispatch urgent words.

Not being a Smartphone user, but miraculously able to survive so far with a "dumb phone," I've been asking: What gives with these damned things? Yes, damned — as in breeding addictions.

The addicts I know best are in my high school, college and law school classes. Sometimes I feel as if I'm in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, but this time it's Smartphones Anonymous.

Students have been generous in sharing their feelings, writing them down, often with heartfelt honesty. "I wish the Smartphone never existed," a high school senior confessed. "It's ruining my life. Phones promote ignorance, laziness, disinterest, pettiness and so many other evils. I feel like my motivation, imagination and education have been lost to my phone addiction. My greatest desire is to go back to elementary school when I read books to relax. I just want to read! I feel so uneducated right now."

A college student majoring in international studies writes:

> I definitely would consider myself addicted to technology — my phone and laptop. I really noticed it recently when I went to Peru over winter break. I didn't have cell service there because international plans are really

> expensive. So when we were out for the day I had no access to the internet. But as soon as we got to a restaurant, the first question we'd ask was what the password was so we could use our phones. It's sad to think that we were supposed to be traveling and exploring a new culture, but we were so focused on using our phones. I'm always worried that when I don't have my phone something bad will happen and I'll miss a call from my mom or a friend asking for help. This has never happened though, so I don't know why I'm so worried about it.

A high school senior who has had a phone since 8th grade:

> I probably spend around 6 hours a day on it, although I wish it was less. I am without a doubt addicted to my phone, and while it is necessary to communicate with my friends and family, and search for information, there are so many added features that I frankly don't need. The phone distracts me from my work and conversations, and its harsh light can give me a headache and make it hard to fall asleep after a day of staring at it. It feels upsetting to know how addicted I am, especially when my parents yell at me to get off it. But the fact that many of us can't live without the stimulation and also the fact that we know everyone else is using it, and we'll be left out if we're not, keeps us all from purging our addictive phone behavior.

One more:

> I got my smartphone at the end of 10th grade, which was 'late' in the game compared to 99 percent of my friends. I remember back to 6th grade when most of my friends had already been given the coolest tech on the consumer market. Once I got my phone I stopped thinking about things other than it. Subconsciously, I craved it, and it was never hard to reach into my pocket. I do not sleep next to my phone anymore. I put it on my desk when I go to sleep, about 30 minutes before bed actually, so that I do not look at the screen before trying to fall asleep. My phone can keep me up for hours into the night and morning. Without it, I am asleep by 10 or 10:30 p.m. I once heard someone compare the addiction to that of alcohol. We are giving kids phones at a young age, but not alcohol. Why would we assume its addictive developments aren't just as harmful? We

keep alcohol locked away, but we keep our phones in our pockets.

Whatever positives these tiny-touch screens may bring to their users and their online worlds in the past two decades since the devices were first marketed by Silicon Valley, the negatives are mounting: cognitive confusion, panic disorders, loss of impulse control, depression, decisional overload. One result is nomophobia — short for no-mobile-phone phobia: the ailment caused by fear of separation from a device.

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Studies proliferate, warnings are sounded by everyone from school guidance counselors to neuroscientists. In *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*, Sherry Turkle, a psychologist and MIT professor, writes that "technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. We'd rather text than talk."

Even while on highways. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that approximately nine people are killed every day and more than 1,000 injured due to texting, numbers six times greater than crashes from drunk driving.

Before the world falls apart, help of a sort is on the way: *How To Break Up With Your Phone*. The author, Catherine Price, offers tips that range from setting aside time for connecting with friends to reading books.

Books? Be careful. It was St. Francis of Assisi in the early 13th century who scorned reading books and told his brothers in the Order of Friar Minors to stay away from them.

They're distractions. Like Smartphones.

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