Mobile Phones and Society — How Being Constantly Connected Impacts Our Lives

Mobile phones have become a staple of our society, with everyone from elementary school kids to senior citizens owning at least one. Although mobile apps and texting have made our lives easier, some question the impact they’ve had on the relationships we have with one another.

After losing part of her vision three years ago, Dr. Lisabeth Saunders Medlock, PhD, CLC, owner of Life by Design Coaching, can no longer see her cell phone. She replaced her Blackberry with a flip phone that reads out loud to her.

“I have a mobile phone that is a basic flip phone where it talks aloud to tell me who is calling and reads all the screens and text aloud,” she says. “I really love the fact I am not always looking at a phone. I can interact and socialize and truly have to be in each moment because I cannot distract or amuse myself with my phone.

“It is also freeing to not really have to respond to emails or even text messages when I choose to not be available. What it forces me and others to do is pick up the phone and talk. Having those dialogues has deepened friendships and allowed me to get to know people better.”

“And if I really needed to use GPS or look up a number, I am usually with a person who can do that for me,” she continues. “I am glad I cannot use a smartphone because it would waste time and energy and probably make me less smart.”

Addicted to Mobile Phones

Todd Starkweather, General Studies program director at South University, Richmond believes a lot of people are at least somewhat addicted to their cell phone.

“I see it frequently in my classes,” he says. “I make certain that students using their phones don’t disturb the learning of others, but do not make an active effort to police an individual who may not be paying attention.”

Starkweather says it’s up to the student whether or not they choose to spend class time listening and learning, or wasting their time on the phone.

As for the impact mobile phones have made on his own personal life, Starkweather says it’s helped him to stay more connected to family and friends than he was in the past.

I never take my phone into my classroom when I teach. Somehow I’m able to get through that hour and 40 minutes without my phone.

“I suppose I’m in much more constant contact with individuals, getting frequent updates,” he says.

He remembers the days before mobile phones when it wouldn’t seem like a long time to go eight hours not hearing from close friends or family members.

For example, before everyone had mobile phones, he says if a friend went on vacation you probably wouldn’t hear from them while they’re away, but now you often receive frequent updates of their journey from the road.

Although having the ability to connect with anyone, at almost anytime, is convenient, Starkweather doesn’t feel it’s necessary to have the device glued to his side at all times.

“There are times when I simply put the phone away, times I don’t need it,” Starkweather says.

“I never take my phone into my classroom when I teach,” Starkweather adds. “Somehow I’m able to get through that hour and 40 minutes without my phone.”
Mobile Phones Changing Interpersonal Communication

Saunders Medlock advises mobile phone users to set rules and practice good phone etiquette.

“Some of these are no phones at a meal, whether it be at home or eating out; no checking the phone on a date or when you are out with friends; phone is off at critical meetings and set to vibrate at others,” she says. “And it goes without saying you should not be on or using your phone while driving.”

She says people are in the habit of checking their cell phone in short intervals of time, like every five minutes.

“I have heard people say that they are afraid they will miss something if they do not do the checking,” she says. “And when people are not doing anything else they tend to interact with their phones to distract or entertain themselves. I have seen people in the line for the bathroom playing with their phones.”

She believes this constant reliance on mobile phones is having a negative impact on people’s interpersonal skills.

To understand the effect of Smartphones and social media on interpersonal communication, she recommends reading the book, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other, by Sherry Turkle.

“The use of texting and Facebook and Twitter and other sites as a form of communication is eroding people’s ability to write sentences that communicate real meaning and inhibit the art of dialogue,” Saunders Medlock says. “It also allows people to communicate without ever seeing each other or hearing a voice, and this has a huge impact in that much communication is done nonverbally or in inflection and tone of voice. We will have a generation that has no clue how to read any of these cues.”

On the other side, Starkweather doesn’t believe mobile phones have necessarily had a negative impact on people’s intrapersonal skills.

He notes that people still need to do the same things when they’re communicating, such as making sure conversation is suitable for the audience they’re addressing.

“People still need to make sure they’re saying appropriate things, no matter what the situation,” Starkweather says. “The mobile phone has made it easier to amplify those mistakes.”

Monitoring Children’s Cell Phone Usage

“Research demonstrates that phones are eroding our ability to communicate in face-to-face dialogue and reducing family conversation,” Saunders Medlock says. “Gone are the days of sitting together at a table and asking the simple question of ‘how was your day?’ But that should not be the case.”

She advises parents to set time aside, where no mobile phones or other devices are present, just to spend quality time together as a family.

“Playing old school interactive games as a family is a way to have family fun time,” she says. “And of course any outdoor family activity is important. It is hard to use a mobile phone and go on a hike or a bike ride.”

She recommends that parents limit their children’s access to certain websites, and the downloading of specific mobile apps. She says children should have prepaid phones, so there are limits on talk, texting, and data usage. Parents should check their children’s mobile phones at least once per week, to keep a close watch on what they’re up to, she says.

“My child has an iPod Touch and I have a security access code for the Wi-Fi and I also hook it up to iTunes every week to check what apps she has downloaded,” she says. “If I see one I don’t like, I remove it.”
“In addition phones could be seen as a privilege so are earned and can be taken away for misbehaviors,” she says. “Parents can also limit phone usage time to a set number of hours per week or day.”