

Making his phone dumber was the smartest thing he ever did



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GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 23, 2018

One morning in the fall of 2008, I interviewed an MIT professor named Sherry Turkle at a cafe on Newbury Street. Turkle is a well-known scholar on the intersection of humans and technology, and we spent much of the conversation talking not about her past research but about her newest obsession, the small device she kept turning over in her hand. It was an iPhone 3G, which she and millions of other people had just acquired.

The 3G was the second iPhone model, but the first with the all-important GPS, and its arrival was the moment smartphones seemed to go from rare to everywhere.

Turkle was raving about it, and her curious mind was asking all sorts of questions about the impact it might have. But there was no question in her mind that I had to get one. She insisted.

After the interview was over, I went outside, reached in my pocket to pull out my trusty old flip-phone, and as I did, it went flying out of my hands, somersaulted high into the air, and smashed into several pieces on a Back Bay sidewalk.

I took it as fate. So I got an iPhone.

Its impact on my life was immediate. Just a few days later, I had a vivid experience that revealed how quickly I had become attached to it. I was walking down the street when I got caught in a downpour, so I stopped under an awning, reached for my new iPhone, and began furiously flipping through the apps with a strange frustration, as if I was expecting the phone to have some sort of solution for the rain. Was I looking for an umbrella app?

Very quickly, we as a society learned that the smartphone was capable of making us do dumb things. Within three years, Turkle had written a book titled “Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other.” The cover featured photos of people walking through the world with their heads down in their phones.

The capabilities of a smartphone, of course, are unmatched in human history. Never have we had such portable potential in our pockets. But for me at least, the good was in constant war with the bad — the endless potential for distraction that took me out of moments I should not be leaving.

For a good long while now, it has felt to me like opening the fridge when you aren't really hungry, and you end up eating something you don't need.

And I was opening the fridge over and over and over and over.

So, like a good American, I made a New Year's resolution. I was going to go on a smartphone diet, and I would do it by turning my smartphone into a much dumber phone.

Step one was to get on the scale, to get a starting point, so I began using an app called Moment that tracks how much you use your smartphone. It also tracks your "pickups" — the number of times you activate the screen.

My numbers were horrifying. I was averaging about 5½ hours a day — one day it was close to 9 — and about 80 pickups, which is about once every 10 minutes I'm awake.

Even more horrifying: I was not atypical. There are a ton of studies on screen time, with varying results for different demographics, but my usage was only slightly above what appeared to be "normal" for an adult. (I'll defend myself here and say my numbers were slightly skewed during the measurement period because I let myself go a bit the way you do when you're about to start a diet.)

To cut those numbers way down, I knew I needed more than willpower. I had to get the junk food out of the house.

So I installed an app called Freedom, which I'd been using on my laptop for years and was thrilled to learn is now available for smartphones. Freedom is quite simple. You tell it what to block, set a timer, and that's it. I had long used it to turn my laptop into a glorified typewriter, and it was amazing how much writing I could get done in a few hours when the distractions of the Internet were no longer a click away.

It works much the same for a phone. The app has a recommended list of the big time-wasters such as Facebook, Twitter, Gmail, LinkedIn, Instagram, Netflix, Reddit, Tinder, Apple News, and YouTube, and you just slide a bar to block the ones you want out of reach. Or you could add your own sites (or just block all apps and websites). There's even a bar you can slide to block all politics. I slid that bar.

The other thing I did was turn my phone to grayscale, which is a popular hack people are using to cut down on screen time because you'd be amazed by how much less appealing a phone is without all those colorful icons that are designed to make you want to click. There are tons of websites that will walk you through the steps to do this, and you can set a shortcut so that three clicks on the home button will restore the color, should you want to watch a video or look at photos.

So I created my own personal blocklist on Freedom, set the timer for 24 hours at a time, the longest allowable, turned the phone to grayscale, and set off.

My phone could still do all of the things that I think of as positives (or, at least, did not feel like problems for me). I can still use my GPS for directions, and text my friends, and e-mail, and search the Web for answers to questions. I still listen to music and podcasts ("Moment" only counts the time your screen is actually on, not the time the audio is playing). What I no longer do is mindlessly follow my dumb thumb through what had become an unconscious routine nearly every time I turned on the phone — Facebook, e-mail, news, sports, back to Facebook to see if anything had changed in the two minutes since I was last there. . . .

I've been on my diet for about six weeks now, and the numbers on the scale are dramatically better. My average daily usage is now under 90 minutes. Most days it's closer to an hour, but occasionally I'll have a day when work demands or GPS directions drag my average up. My "pickups" have dropped to 20 on a typical day; I'm simply opening the fridge less.

As a result, I have essentially given myself the gift of four free hours each day. That is staggering.

What have I done with all that extra time? Well, it's surprising. I've begun the monumental task of finally cleaning out my basement. I've read books. I have used my phone as an actual telephone to call old friends. I've experienced quiet solitude. I did a woodworking project with my kids, who have received so much more of my actual attention, not just my presence in the room.

This is pathetic but true. I am of the generation that goes to great lengths to control screen time for our children, but rarely for ourselves.

Occasionally on this journey, I have experienced something I had practically forgotten about — I've been bored. And it has been amazing. I forgot how much creativity is born of boredom.

Best of all, I'm learning new habits. Sometimes, my 24-hour Freedom timer will go off and I'll neglect to reset it, but I still don't dumb-thumb through my old time wasters. I don't miss any of

them.

Sure, there are still days when I pig out on smartphone junk food. A few weeks ago there was a moment when my phone notified me that my Freedom session had ended, and I stupidly opened my phone and started thumbing through the road to nowhere. Two hours later, I knew entirely too much about a sports radio commentator who had called Tom Brady's daughter a pissant.

You think you're just going to eat one chip but then you eat the entire bag.

I reset the timer and went back to my Freedom.

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