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DO you find yourself staring at your smartphone in the presence of another person? Do you find it difficult to put your phone aside even when you know you should? If you answered yes, you could be guilty of phone snubbing or phubbing.

Though phubbing may seem harmless at first, it can strain a relationship, especially one that's already in trouble, says Faith Foo, a counsellor based in Petaling Jaya.

Couples with relationship woes, says Foo, are increasingly bringing up phone snubbing as one of their issues.

"If their partners are on the phone while they're talking to them, they see this as their partner

prioritising the device over them.

"It is a rude and dismissive gesture and that is why they can get so angry," Foo says, adding that the person being snubbed may feel excluded, unheard, disrespected and disregarded.

Phone snubbing can also threaten a person's need to feel connected and the issue is not restricted to couples.

And it doesn't matter if the meeting is virtual or face-to-face, or whether you are with your friends, family members, colleagues, clients or bosses, it is still rude to be stuck on the phone, says Wendy Lee,

## Divided by DEVICES

The inability to put devices away even in the company of others – known as phone snubbing – is causing a rift in relationships.

founder of Chapter One Asia, an image consultancy firm.

"If you're having a conversation and still looking at your phone to

entertain others, it implies that the people you are with are not worth your time or attention," she says.

Lee describes the phubbing phenomenon as "disheartening" as people are paying more attention to their phones without realising how this affects personal and professional relationships.

Even corporate training courses are not exempt, as Lee has had to come up with ways to keep participants engaged and away from their devices.

"In corporate training, out of respect and professionalism, participants will usually put

away their phones, unless they get bored or if they have urgent things to attend to.

"Knowing this habit, we always ensure that our sessions are jam-packed with activities, tests, quizzes or group work so that they will not slip into their handphone-checking habit," Lee says.

If participants are caught using their phones, they may even be asked to assist the facilitators by becoming, say, timekeepers to keep them occupied.

"As part of our corporate image training lessons, we emphasise the need to maintain eye contact when conversing with another person.

"Eye contact shows attentiveness and interest in what is being said," she says.

> TURN TO PAGE 2



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# Stuck to smartphones

> FROM PAGE 1

However, Lee acknowledges that people can't always put away their phones due to work requirements.

"For example, assistants and secretaries may need to be in constant contact with their bosses.

"For people who work with others in different time zones, handling logistics or inquiries, their response times may make or break a sale," she shares.

## Constantly connected

People alone are not to be blamed for their addiction to their phones, says Alvin Tan, director and clinical psychologist at People Psychological Solutions in Kuala Lumpur, as smartphone technology is designed to make the device attractive to users.

"While phones in the past were used solely for voice calls, modern devices have become integrated into our lives and work.

"In Industry 4.0, I see it as being a necessary component to living, as virtual and physical interconnectivity will allow us to live better lives, solving many of the problems we are facing," he says. Industry 4.0, which aims to increase manufacturing efficiency through automation and smart technology, is expected to improve people's lives by providing better services and goods.

However, as with any technology, there are drawbacks, he says, especially when the smartphone is used as a social crutch or when a person develops a behavioural addiction.

"Technology is meant to improve our lives, which should happen in the here and now, as opposed to 'replacing it'.

"When in a social setting, being focused on the phone instead of the person in front of us defeats the purpose of smartphones, which are meant to connect us with others," Tan adds.

There are three reasons why people choose to withdraw from social situations with their smartphones.

Tan believes the first cause is due to people seeking emotional relief from anxious situations.

"Social situations may demand a certain level of skill, and this may overwhelm some of us.

"The phone then becomes a refuge for relieving the anxiety of being in those social settings," he says.

On the other hand, some people could be seeking additional stimulation from their smartphones when a social situation becomes underwhelming or boring.

"By turning on the smartphone, a 'quick fix' can be achieved, and the user is then appropriately stimulated and engaged," he says.

The third reason, Tan continues, is linked to "behavioural desensitisation", a process by which people gradually become accustomed to a certain type of behaviour over a period of time.

"When the use of smartphones in mid-conversation becomes a norm, it is no longer viewed as something that isn't desirable or improper," he explains.

Researchers have found that the "continuous dopamine high" people get from using cellphones makes them addictive, according to HELP University's Faculty of Behavioural Sciences dean, Dr Gerard Louis.

"For those with self-esteem issues, getting favourable reactions on social media gives them a sense of belonging. Some also like the feeling they get from winning in video games.

"What they all want is this wonderful feeling of achieving something. It becomes problematic when we don't know how to stop and the phone constantly invades our social space," he says.

According to a report published in August last year by *The Guardian*, smartphones are turning more people into dopamine addicts.

Addiction expert Dr Anna Lembke described the smartphone as a "modern day hypodermic needle" that people turn to for validation, companionship, distraction or likes.

## Ditching the devices

How does one approach a habitual phubber? According to Foo, it begins with the use of positive language to achieve a desired outcome, an approach that is typically used in sensitive situations.

"Avoid critical statements like, 'Why don't you marry your phone since you can't stop looking at it?'

"Instead, invite your partner to work with you: 'Can we not have phones at dinner time together? I would truly appreciate you giving me your attention,'" she says.

Louis concurs, stating that it's critical to communicate issues by focusing on the behaviour, rather than using labels such as "disrespectful" or saying "You don't love me".



"The reason why you'd want to avoid labels or drawing conclusions is because the other person may not be aware of his or her behaviour.

"For some people, this could affect their self-esteem and worsen their condition if they already have mental health issues like depression," he explains.

He adds that one way to communicate effectively is to express a consequence if the person does not change his or her behaviour.

"They can say, 'That behaviour is a problem for me and I would like that to change. If this behaviour persists, then I will find something else to do,'" he says, adding that it should be expressed as a matter of fact.

Phone snubbing may also be a symptom of a deeper issue, says Tan, such as a lack of social skills, an unhealthy relationship dynamic, or unfulfilled needs, including not being in a meaningful or rewarding relationship.

"These concerns can be brought up safely with a trained therapist and addressed to achieve a desirable quality of life," Tan adds.

When someone feels the need to break the habit, Louis suggests they begin by learning to put aside their device and concentrate on specific tasks.

The objective is to minimise contact with the object that triggers the phone snubbing tendency.

"Simply put: out of sight, out of mind. When you've accomplished something, you can give yourself a reward after that," he says.

Lee recommends disabling as many push notifications as possible for apps such as *Twitter*, *WhatsApp* and *WeChat*.

"If you don't hear it, you won't reach for it," Lee says, recommending that the phone be placed further away so it's harder to reach.

She also urges people to put away their phones at bedtime instead of scrolling through social media networks.



Break the phone snubbing habit by learning to put aside your device and concentrate on specific tasks, Louis recommends. — HELP University



Lee describes the phubbing phenomenon as 'disheartening' as people are unaware that it affects personal and professional relationships. — WENDY LEE



According to Tan, some people turn to their phones to seek emotional relief from tense social situations. — ALVIN TAN



Couples experiencing relationship difficulties are increasingly bringing up phone snubbing as one of their issues, says Foo. — SAMUEL ONG/The Star







It felt uneasy for her at the beginning, she confesses, as she was worried about missing out on interesting and important news.

"After practising this routine for a while, I realised that the world was the same as before I went to bed, and no one called or messaged me," Lee shares.

Louis also advises parents to regulate their children's smartphone use so they don't become accustomed to phone snubbing.

Parents like filmmaker Linus Chung have resorted to an app like *Google Family Link* to track how long their children are using their smartphones.

He restricts them to two hours of digital time per day, which has encouraged them to budget their time on their phones.

He is not opposed to technology, he says, as it will be a disadvantage for the children to not know how to use a smartphone in this day and age.

"There are also useful apps that they can use, such as the language learning app *Duolingo* and the game *Minecraft*, which requires creativity.

"Just giving them the phone is not good enough as you need to ensure that they have a more rounded experience," Chung says, adding that he often plans hiking activities to encourage the kids to spend time outdoors.

Meanwhile, entrepreneur Adam Wong makes it a point to put away his phone when he's having dinner with his family.

"We don't use our phones during family gatherings. I think it's a sign of respect," he says, explaining that for him, meal times have always been about paying attention to people around him.

Tan points out that people have to understand that socialising in the real world is still a very much-needed skill, though it may not always be engaging or fun.

"It can be boring, underwhelming or even anxiety-provoking. That is the nature of the social world. It is a reality that we must appreciate for us to live harmoniously and meaningfully with others," he says.

Meanwhile, Lee maintains that putting away devices is not about abstaining from the digital world or being entirely out of the loop.

"The goal isn't to get rid of your phones, but rather to accept that you have the power to let them go.

"Your phone can be your favourite pastime, but your priority must always be humans, not gadgets," she concludes.

Graphics: Freepik.com



A senior domestic affairs mediator says 30% of marital conflict cases she has dealt with are related to excessive use of mobile phones. — SCMP

## Phone addiction ruins marriages

MOBILE phone addiction is responsible for up to 30% of failed marriages in China, claim some marriage counsellors.

"Playing with mobile phones has occupied a great deal of people's time which should be used to communicate with partners, perform household duties or educate kids.

"But spending too much time on phones has led to many couples experiencing conflict," Kang Lanying, a senior marital conflict mediator in Wuhan, Hubei province, central China, told the *Yangtze Daily*.

There are over 10,000 domestic affairs mediators in Wuhan alone. Cao Hongling, another senior mediator, who works in Wuhan, said 30% of the marital conflict cases she has dealt with are related to excessive use of mobile phones.

"Mobile phone addiction has led to a lack of communication between husbands and wives.

"The party who spends too much time on their phone doesn't share the housework and doesn't care about the other person.

"All these problems have eventually led to their divorce," Cao said.

Cao said it is a form of domestic violence, known as "cold violence", when a person spends all their time on their mobile phone and neglects their partner and household duties.

China's divorce rate rose from two cases per 1,000 people in 2010 to 3.4 per 1,000 in 2019, before dropping to 3.1 per 1,000 people in 2020.

The surging divorce rate prompted the authorities to introduce a controversial 30-day

cooling-off period last year.

Cao said she once helped a woman who said she applied for divorce as she felt a sense of "suffocation" at home and didn't feel any warmth.

"He didn't care about me, our kid, or our home. He just played with his mobile phone as soon as he got home from work, and would do nothing else.

"I asked him to help me do the housework, but he didn't respond," the woman told Cao. "I cannot accept this deathly stillness."

Her husband said he didn't think he did anything wrong because he returned home every day after work.

"I just surfed on the Internet, checked social media, read news, and played games on my mobile," said the man.

He rejected Cao's suggestion and refused to reduce the time he spent on his mobile phone.

China's mainland Internet users are divided over the claims of mobile phones being a significant factor in driving up divorces.

"Couples don't have love between them any longer. Don't use the mobile as an excuse for their break-up," wrote one person on Weibo.

But another person said, "Exactly! Playing games and watching videos on mobile phones really takes up a lot of time. As a result, people don't have any spare time or energy to think about other things." — South China Morning Post



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