

Put Your Phone in the Friend Zone: Global Day of Unplugging - Ask an Expert

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March 1 is Global Day of Unplugging, a day set aside to encourage people to disconnect from the electronic world, experience nature, talk to people, and, even if just for a day, live life without screens.

Smartphones have been around in varying forms since the 1990s, and as they have become more widely used, researchers have studied their impact on our mental health. Numerous studies continue to show how “problem smartphone overuse” (not general use) can impact mental health by affecting sleep quality, social interactions, and ability to focus. Smartphones allow us to work remotely, find our way around town, stay up-to-date on world events, and many other benefits. However, cell phones become a problem when overuse interferes with daily functioning.

Setting boundaries around phone use can benefit mental, emotional, and social health. So, consider putting your smartphone in the “friend zone” on March 1 and beyond by trying these tips.

- Turn off notifications, including work email when you are home and social media when you are at work. Mental health can be influenced by how connected we feel to our phone, if we feel obligated to monitor it continuously, and even our motivation for using it. Turning off notifications can help us set boundaries, especially between work and home.

- Use your phone as a tool. It’s easy to use it to fill time when boredom sets in, but focus on the positive things it can do to make life easier. For example, arrange your phone so that productive apps like email, fitness, maps, and work-related programs are on the home screen. Put apps like social media, shopping, and games into folders or a place less accessible.
- Delete apps you haven’t used in a while. Consider removing apps that are only for convenience, such as for shopping or news. You can access these through an internet search, which takes more conscious effort and can make you more intentional about how you spend your time. And there’s also the bonus of freeing up space and data on your phone!
- Assess how you use your phone. Is most of your phone time spent scrolling through social media or playing games? If so, consider deleting the apps for a time. Let others know what you are doing and ask for support. They may even join you! Sharing your goals with others helps with accountability and motivation.
- Set time and physical limits. Have a pre-set time limit, such as 15 minutes during lunch or after completing an assignment. Take your phone out only during those times, and hold yourself accountable to your schedule.
- Make a list of alternative things you can do when you feel the impulse to mindlessly scroll on your phone. Instead of texting, try visiting in person or writing a letter and sending it through snail mail. Instead of spending time on social media, read a book, play games with your family, go for a walk, explore nature, work on a project, or serve in your community.
- Find strategies that work for you and set attainable goals. If you live with others, create a group challenge, set limits, and devise creative ways to reward positive use.

While not all these strategies may work for you, consider trying at least one. Then note if you saw any changes in your physical, mental, or emotional health, connections with others, and time management. You may find that unplugging, even for a bit, can have positive impacts and will be something you want to do beyond March 1!

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