

The Addiction in Our Pocket

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Daniel Cummins, Class of 2024, had a Program of Emphasis in Accounting with a Secondary in Philosophy and won first place in the 2024 Bailey Oratorical Contest.

What if I told you that everyone, including myself, sitting in this room right now has an addiction? And not just any addiction, but one that's taking ten years off of our lives. What would you do differently? Now we have all heard of the common substances and activities that can lead you to become addicted: drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, doing drugs, gambling. These are all things that we are told to avoid, that we are taught are bad for us. But this addiction shared between everyone in this room, well, it is something different. It is not something we are taught to avoid.

In fact, in many ways it is considered a requirement to be a part of modern society, to get the full benefits of being in a social circle, to connect with people across the world. That addiction, it lives in our pocket. The average American spends 3.25 hours per day looking at their cell phone. Take that 3.25 hours per day extend it over a seventy-seven-year lifespan - you have ten years taken off your life.

Ten years that you could spend with your older loved ones before they are gone. Ten years you could spend meeting a spouse, building a family. Ten years you could spend building your career. Ten years gone just like that. Spent not enriching your life, not interacting with others, but in the isolating company of your cell phone.

For the individuals of our generation to reach their full potential for health and wellbeing, we need to address our addiction to our phones. To do so will require a radical new approach that allows us to reprogram our brain. Today, I am going to tell you why it is so hard to quit using our phones, and how to change the structure of our brains to circumvent this problem.

First, the idea that we need to use our phones less is nothing new. For decades now, scientists have been talking about the huge amount of time we spend staring at screens. The information is out there, and most of us would agree that we have a problem when it comes to limiting time on our phones. I know I do. I look around in the cafeteria at Juniata, at this special place of community, and I see students sitting, facing each other, with their face in their phones. Not speaking, not interacting, texting, going on Snapchat, going on Instagram. I know this is occurring because I find myself doing it too. This is not an insignificant problem; it is a fight for the very lifeblood of the Juniata community, for the connections that

hold us together. Our community is dying, and we need to treat the electronic rot that is killing it. Knowing all this, why have we not quit using our phones so much?

We have not quit because we cannot. The way our brains are currently programmed, going cold turkey just is not going to work. Through our evolutionary history, our brain has developed a sort of reward system that gives us a good feeling when we perform an activity that is essential for our survival. When we eat food, our brain rewards us with a hit of dopamine. When we socialize with others, as was often essential to survive in the wilderness, our brain sends us that same dopamine signal. And for thousands of years this system worked great - it kept our species on the top of the evolutionary food chain; it kept us alive.

But our brains have been slow to adapt to the modern era. What else triggers a dopamine rush? Heroin, methamphetamines, and our phones. Research by Dr. Anna Lembke has shown that our cell phones cause a hit of dopamine in our brain every time we check them.¹ Every Instagram post, every text, every email, every time we bring that phone up to our face, that dopamine, it floods in. Our attention span for everything else shortens, and our life revolves around our phones. We become addicted to those quick hits of dopamine. Our cell phone is built to demand our attention, and the device is devastatingly effective at that purpose.

Make no mistake; this addiction is by design. Social media companies hire experts called attention engineers. Their job? Get you addicted to your phone. They leverage the same principles that underlie Las Vegas slot machines to get you to spend as much time on your phone as possible. Your phone is a designer drug.

How do we escape? What can we do to reprogram our brain's reward system and escape our phones? Science is increasingly pointing to the simple act of learning to do nothing: meditation. Now, if most of you are like I was, you are skeptical of the idea that closing your eyes, taking a few deep breaths, and focusing on yourself can actually change your brain. But the remarkable fact of the matter is, it can.

Research by Sara Lazar of Harvard and Eileen Luders of the University of Auckland has found that a consistent meditative practice actually reshapes the *physical structure* of your brain. There is cortical thickening in the prefrontal cortex.² What does that mean in simple terms? Your brain gets bigger. It gets stronger. It gains a greater ability to focus. And as your brain changes, you begin to break free of the addictive hold of your cell phone. You learn to focus more on what can bring you long-term happiness.

Now I do not just come before you as a dispassionate advocate of this mode of treatment. I am a recipient of it. Juniata is experiencing this problem, but the unique academic environment of Juniata can also fix it. Through Juniata's generous study abroad program, I had the chance to travel to Costa Rica, to engage in a consistent meditative practice myself, and to break up with my phone. Through the meditative

practices I learned there and have continued every day since, I have found myself less connected with my device, less distracted by notifications, and more able to be present.

And in fact, as you increase your capacity for attention you will be able to spend more time with your family and friends without being distracted by the notifications on your phone. You will begin to notice the things around you. The beauty of nature at our Peace Chapel and the Cliffs, the amazing community we are surrounded by, the kindness and excellence that this special place exudes. As you notice these things around you, the hold your cell phone has on your life will fade.

That is not to say it is easy to cultivate a mindfulness practice. It is a very hard thing to learn to sit there without the entertainment of your cellphone, with your eyes closed, and simply breath *inhale* - in, *exhale* - out. It takes some time to build a practice. Just like it takes time in the gym to get stronger, it takes time to strengthen your brain enough to break away from your device. But the effects are remarkable, the research is there, and the effort is worth it.

I urge you, the next time you feel the need to scroll through Instagram, to check your Snapchat stories, to stare at YouTube, instead close your eyes, take a deep breath, and sit. Sit for five minutes, ten minutes, however long you can manage, and meditate. Focus on the way your body is feeling, the small in and out of your breath, the sounds around you. Focus on the present moment. If this helps you take even one hour of your cell phone use off per day, that is three years of your life you've taken back. So give yourself the gift of longer life, break free from your cell phone, meditate, and decide what you want to do with those three years. Thank you.

NOTES

1. Jamie Waters, "Constant Craving: How Digital Media Turned Us All Into Dopamine Addicts," *The Observer*, August 22, 2021, sec. Life and style, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2021/aug/22/how-digital-media-turned-us-all-into-dopamine-addicts-and-what-we-can-do-to-break-the-cycle>.
2. Sara W. Lazar et al., "Meditation experience is associated with increased cortical thickness," *Neuroreport* 16, no. 17 (November 28, 2005): 1893-1897, <https://doi.org/10.1097%2F01.wnr.0000186598.66243.19>; Eileen Luders et al., "The Unique Brain Anatomy of Meditation Practitioners: Alterations in Cortical Gyrification," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 6 (February 29, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00034>; Eileen Luders et al., "The underlying anatomical correlates of long-term meditation: Larger hippocampal and frontal volumes of gray matter," *Neuroimage* 45, no. 3 (April 15, 2009): 672-678, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2008.12.061>.