

1. **Mark your confusion.**
2. **Show evidence of a close reading.**
3. **Write a 1+ page reflection.**

Do Not Disturb: How I Ditched My Phone and Unbroke My Brain

Source: Kevin Roose, *New York Times*, February 23, 2019

My name is Kevin, and I have a phone problem.

And if you're anything like me — and the statistics suggest you probably are, at least where smartphones are concerned — you have one, too.

I don't love referring to what we have as an "addiction." That seems too sterile and clinical to describe what's happening to our brains in the smartphone era. Unlike alcohol or opioids, phones aren't an addictive substance so much as a species-level environmental shock. We might someday evolve the correct biological hardware to live in harmony with portable supercomputers that satisfy our every need and connect us to infinite amounts of stimulation. But for most of us, it hasn't happened yet.

I've been a heavy phone user for my entire adult life. But sometime last year, I crossed the invisible line into problem territory. My symptoms were all the typical ones: I found myself incapable of reading books, watching full-length movies or having long uninterrupted conversations. Social media made me angry and anxious, and even the digital spaces I once found soothing (group texts, podcasts, YouTube k-holes) weren't helping. I tried various tricks to curb my usage, like deleting Twitter every weekend, turning my screen grayscale and installing app-blockers. But I always relapsed.

Eventually, in late December, I decided that enough was enough. I called Catherine Price, a science journalist and the author of "How to Break Up With Your Phone," a 30-day guide to eliminating bad phone habits. And I begged her for help.

Mercifully, she agreed to be my phone coach for the month of January, and walk me through her plan, step by step. Together, we would build a healthy relationship with my phone, and try to unbreak my brain.

'A Bit Horrifying'

I confess that entering phone rehab feels clichéd, like getting really into healing crystals or Peloton. Digital wellness is a budding industry these days, with loads of self-help gurus offering miracle cures for screen addiction. Some of those solutions involve new devices — such as the "Light Phone," a device with an extremely limited feature set that is meant to wean users off time-sucking apps. Others focus on cutting out screens entirely for weeks on end. You can now buy \$299 "digital detox" packages at luxury hotels or join the "digital sabbath" movement, whose adherents vow to spend one day a week using no technology at all.

Thankfully, Catherine's plan is more practical. I'm a tech columnist, and while I don't begrudge anyone for trying more extreme forms of disconnection, my job prevents me from going cold turkey.

Instead, her program focuses on addressing the root causes of phone addiction, including the emotional triggers that cause you to reach for your phone in the first place. The point isn't to get you off the internet, or even off social media — you're still allowed to use Facebook, Twitter and other social platforms on a desktop or laptop, and there's no hard-and-fast time limit. It's simply about unhooking your brain from the harmful routines it has adopted around this particular device, and hooking it to better things.

When we started, I sent her my screen time statistics, which showed that I had spent 5 hours and 37 minutes on my phone that day, and picked it up 101 times — roughly twice as many as the average American.

"That is frankly insane and makes me want to die," I wrote to her.

"I will admit that those numbers are a bit horrifying," she replied.

Catherine encouraged me to set up mental speed bumps so that I would be forced to think for a second before engaging with my phone. I put a rubber band around the device, for example, and changed my lock screen to one that showed three questions to ask myself every time I unlocked my phone: "What for? Why now? What else?"

For the rest of the week, I became acutely aware of the bizarre phone habits I'd developed. I noticed that I reach for my phone every time I brush my teeth or step outside the front door of my apartment building, and that, for some pathological reason, I always check my email during the three-second window between when I insert my credit card into a chip reader at a store and when the card is accepted.

Mostly, I became aware of how profoundly uncomfortable I am with stillness. For years, I've used my phone every time I've had a spare moment in an elevator or a boring meeting. I listen to podcasts and write emails on the subway. I watch YouTube videos while folding laundry. I even use an app to pretend to meditate.

If I was going to repair my brain, I needed to practice doing nothing. So during my morning walk to the office, I looked up at the buildings around me, spotting architectural details I'd never noticed before. On the subway, I kept my phone in my pocket and people-watched — noticing the nattily dressed man in the yellow hat, the teens eating hot Takis and laughing, the kid with Velcro shoes. When a friend ran late for our lunch, I sat still and stared out the window instead of checking Twitter.

It's an unnerving sensation, being alone with your thoughts in the year 2019. Catherine had warned me that I might feel existential malaise when I wasn't distracting myself with my phone. She also said paying more attention to my surroundings would make me realize how many *other* people used their phones to cope with boredom and anxiety.

"I compare it to seeing a family member naked," she said. "Once you look around the elevator and see the zombies checking their phones, you can't unsee it."

Withdrawal Sets In

Next, I gave my phone the Marie Kondo treatment — looking at all my apps and keeping the ones that sparked joy and contributed to healthy habits and tossing those that didn't.

For me, that meant deleting Twitter, Facebook and all other social media apps, along with news apps and games. I kept messaging services like WhatsApp and Signal, and non-distracting utilities like cooking and navigation apps. I pruned my home screen to just the essentials: calendar, email and password manager. And I disabled push notifications for everything other than phone calls and messages from a preset list of people that included my editor, my wife and a handful of close friends.

Where you keep your phone is also important. Studies have shown that people who don't charge their phones in their bedrooms are significantly happier than those who do. Catherine charges her phone in a closet; for me, she recommended a locking mini-safe. I bought one and started storing my phone inside, which simultaneously reduced my nighttime usage and made me feel like I was guarding the queen's jewels.

And I pursued activities that could replace my phone habit. On the recommendation of my colleague Farhad Manjoo, I signed up for pottery classes. As it turned out, pottery makes a perfect phone substitute. It's manually challenging and demands concentration for hours on end. It gets your hands dirty, too, which is a good deterrent to fiddling with expensive electronics.

After a pottery class, I updated my wife on my progress. I told her that while it felt great to disconnect, I still worried that I was missing something important. I liked having a constant stream of news at my fingertips, and I wanted to do more of the things I actually like about social media, like keeping tabs on my friends' babies and maintaining ambient Kardashian awareness.

"I'm sad that you're having trouble with this," she said, "because it's been great for me."

She explained that since my phone detox started, I'd been more present and attentive at home. I spent more time listening to her, and less time distractedly nodding and mumbling while checking my inbox or tapping out tweets.

Psychologists have a name for this: "phubbing," or snubbing a person in favor of your phone. Studies have shown that excessive phubbing decreases relationship satisfaction and contributes to feelings of depression and alienation.

For years, I've justified my phubbing by treating it as a professional necessity. Isn't it my job to know when news happens? Won't I be neglecting my duties if it takes me an extra hour to learn that Jeff Bezos is getting divorced, or another YouTuber did something racist?

I put this question to Catherine, who reassured me that I wasn't jeopardizing my career by being slightly later to the news. She reminded me that I'd been happier since I dialed down my screen time, and she gently encouraged me to focus on the other side of the cost-benefit analysis.

"Think of the bigger picture of what you're getting by not being on Twitter all the time."

A Thoreau Cleansing

The biggest test came with a "trial separation" — a 48-hour period during which I wasn't allowed to use my phone or any other digital device. (Catherine's program calls for a 24-hour separation, but I decided to try a more hard-core version.)

I had dreaded this idea at the outset, but when the weekend actually arrived, I got giddy with excitement. I rented an off-the-grid Airbnb in the Catskills, warned my editor that I'd be offline for the weekend and took off.

A phone-free weekend involved some complications. Without Google Maps, I got lost and had to pull over for directions. Without Yelp, I had trouble finding open restaurants.

But mostly, it was great. For two solid days, I basked in 19th-century leisure, feeling my nerves softening and my attention span stretching back out. I read books. I did the crossword puzzle. I lit a fire and looked at the stars. I felt like Thoreau, if Thoreau periodically wondered what was happening on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Instagram story.

I also felt twinges of anger — at myself, for missing out on this feeling of restorative boredom for so many years; at the engineers in Silicon Valley who spend their days profitably exploiting our cognitive weaknesses; at the entire phone-industrial complex that has convinced us that a six-inch glass-and-steel rectangle is the ideal conduit for worldly experiences.

Sadly, there is no way to talk about the benefits of digital disconnection without sounding like a Goop subscriber or a neo-Luddite. Performative wellness is obnoxious, as is reflexive technophobia.

But I cannot stress enough that under the right conditions, spending an entire weekend without a phone in your immediate vicinity is *incredible*. You have to try it.

Rewired and Renewed

Allow me a bit of bragging: Over the course of 30 days, my average daily phone time, as measured by the iPhone's built-in screen time tracker, has dwindled from around five hours to just over an hour. I now pick up my phone only about 20 times a day, down from more than 100. I still use my phone for email and texting — and I'm still using my laptop plenty — but I don't itch for social media, and I often go hours without so much as a peek at any screen.

In one of our conversations, I asked Catherine if she worried that I would relapse. She said it was possible, given the addictive properties of phones and the likelihood that they'll only keep getting more essential. But she said that as long as I remained aware of my relationship with my phone, and continued to notice when and how I used it, I'd have gotten something valuable.

"Your life is what you pay attention to," she said. "If you want to spend it on video games or Twitter, that's your business. But it should be a conscious choice."

One of the most unexpected benefits of this program is that by getting some emotional distance from my phone, I've started to appreciate it again. I keep thinking: *Right here, in my pocket, is a device that can summon food, cars and millions of other consumer goods to my door. I can talk with everyone I've ever met, create and store a photographic record of my entire life, and tap into the entire corpus of human knowledge with a few swipes.*

Steve Jobs wasn't exaggerating when he described the iPhone as a kind of magical object, and it's truly wild that in the span of a few years, we've managed to turn these amazing talismanic tools into stress-inducing albatrosses. It's as if scientists had invented a pill that gave us the ability to fly, only to find out that it also gave us dementia.

But there is a way out. I haven't taken an M.R.I. or undergone a psychiatric evaluation, but I'd bet that something fundamental has shifted inside my brain in the past month. A few weeks ago, the world on my phone seemed more compelling than the offline world — more colorful, faster-moving and with a bigger scope of rewards.

I still love that world, and probably always will. But now, the physical world excites me, too — the one that has room for boredom, idle hands and space for thinking. I no longer feel phantom buzzes in my pocket or have dreams about checking my Twitter replies. I look people in the eye and listen when they talk. I ride the elevator empty-handed. And when I get sucked into my phone, I notice and self-correct. It's not a full recovery, and I'll have to stay vigilant. But for the first time in a long time, I'm starting to feel like a human again.

Possible Response Questions:

- What are your thoughts about the effects of your cell phone usage?
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.