REVISED AND UPDATED!

HOW TO

BREAK UP

WITH YOUR

PHONE

CATHERINE PRICE

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CONTENTS

For Clara

Our lives are what we pay attention to.

PREFACE
TO THE REVISED EDITION

When I started working on *How to Break Up with Your Phone* in 2016, most people were not thinking about the potential dark sides of our device use. Smartphones had been around for less than ten years, and many of today's most time-sucking apps and platforms did not exist. Artificial intelligence (AI), deep fakes, chatbots, algorithms, the attention economy, machine learning, virtual reality, brain-computer interfaces, the metaverse, and spatial computing were concepts unfamiliar to most people. The COVID-19 pandemic (and the resulting surge in our screen time) hadn't happened yet. There was a general assumption—and stay with me here, because I know what I'm about to say might sound unbelievably naive—that the people, photos, voices, and videos we encountered on the internet were real.

A few people had begun to raise concerns about how our increasingly intimate relationships with technology might be negatively affecting us (and our children). But it all seemed speculative, in part because the devices and apps were so new.

Fast-forward to today. More than half of Americans report feeling "addicted" to their smartphones, and the average person spends four and a half hours a day on their phone—more than a quarter of their waking life. For teenagers, the numbers are even higher. And that's not counting the time we spend on our

computers, tablets, and televisions. Add it all up, and many of us are now spending a considerable portion of our lives interacting with some type of screen.

Smartphones are useful, of course, but when people tell me why they want to "break up" with their phones, their reasons are often devastating: "I've lost my ability to focus." "I hate the way my phone increases my anxiety." "I feel like I'm an automaton." "I feel that I'm not present—whether at home, at work, or with my friends and family." "I feel like I'm losing my life to my phone, and I hate it."

Unfortunately, in many ways the situation is getting worse. The capabilities and uses of AI are expanding at an explosive rate, technology is becoming more tantalizing, manipulative, pervasive, and invasive, and the line between reality and the virtual world is becoming increasingly blurred. As a result, not only can we no longer trust much of what we encounter online, but whether you're in a coffee shop or an airport, at a playground or a dog park, you're less likely to find people playing or chatting with each other in person than you are to find them staring silently at their screens; even when we're physically "together," we're often emotionally alone. (This may partially explain why we are in the midst of what health authorities refer to as an epidemic of loneliness and isolation.) People often ask me how my feelings about technology have changed since the book's initial publication. The honest answer is that I'm even more concerned.

But the news is not all bad. Around the world, people are taking action. Whereas initially I had trouble finding a publisher for this book, it's now available in more than thirty-five countries, and I hear regularly from people, both in the U.S. and abroad, who report that breaking up with their phones has changed their lives for the better. Dozens of other books have

been published—and advocacy groups and grassroots organizations have been established—that raise awareness about the mental and physical health risks associated with technology overuse for people of all ages. Many companies are now offering app-blockers and smartphone alternatives—phones that allow you to customize which features and apps you (and your children) have access to—allowing people to enjoy the benefits of smartphones without getting sucked into their screens.

The United States surgeon general, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association, and the World Health Organization have all issued advisories or guidance documents regarding smartphone, social media, and screen usage. The United Nations has called for smartphones to be banned in schools from bell to bell, and an increasing number of countries, states, and school districts are doing just that. Parents are joining together in pledging to delay the age at which they give their children access to smartphones and social media, and members of Gen Z—the first generation to never have known a world *without* smartphones and social media— are reducing their own screen time and advocating against giving smartphones and social media to kids. Legislative change is happening, too—in 2018, the European Union enacted the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a set of rules touted as the toughest privacy and security law in the world. In the United States, bills have been proposed that would protect consumer privacy online and regulate tech companies and their products more strictly. It seems like not a month goes by without Congress questioning a technology executive about their practices and products.

In other words, the world has woken up. And if you're reading these words, you have, too.

I believe that change *is* possible—in fact, I know it is—and I hope that this book will help you take the first steps. I hope that it leaves you outraged by how we've been manipulated—but also inspired and empowered. I hope that it helps you create a healthier relationship with your current devices *and* a personalized framework you can use to navigate your relationships with future technologies. I hope it helps you start conversations about screen time, reconnect with your loved ones, reclaim your brain, and develop better habits. And I hope, most of all, that it helps you live a more joyful and meaningful life.

Here's to scrolling less and living more.

—Catherine Price

AN OPEN LETTER TO MY PHONE

Dear Phone,

I still remember the first time we met. You were an expensive new gadget; I was a person who could recite her best friends' phone numbers from memory. When you were launched, I'll admit that your touch screen caught my eye. But I was too busy with my human relationships to start something new.

Then I held you in my hand, and things started moving fast. It wasn't long before we were doing everything together: taking walks, having lunch with friends, going on vacations. At first it seemed strange that you wanted to come with me to the bathroom—but today it's just another formerly private moment for us to share.

We're inseparable now, you and I. You're the last thing I touch before I go to bed and the first thing I reach for in the morning. You remember my doctors' appointments, my shopping lists, and my anniversary. You provide memes and festive screen effects that I can send to friends on their birthdays, so that rather than feeling hurt that I'm texting instead of calling, they

think, "Ooh, animated balloons!" You make it possible for my avoidance strategies to be construed as thoughtfulness, and for this I am grateful.

Phone, you are amazing. I mean that literally: not only do you allow me to travel across time and space, but I am amazed by how many nights I've stayed up past my bedtime staring at your screen. I can't count the times we've gone to bed together and I've had to pinch myself to see if I'm dreaming—and believe me, I *want* to be dreaming, because ever since we met, something seems to be messing with my sleep. I cannot believe all of the gifts you've given me, even though many of those gifts are technically things that I bought for myself online while you and I were "relaxing" in a bath.

Thanks to you, I never need to worry about being alone. Anytime I'm anxious or upset, you offer a game or news story or video to distract me from my feelings. And how about boredom? Before we met, I'd often find myself with no way to pass the time other than to daydream, or maybe think. There were even times when I'd get into the elevator at the office and have nothing to look at but the other passengers. For six floors!

These days, I can't even remember the last time I was bored. Then again, I can't remember a lot of things. Like, for example, the last time my friends and I made it through a meal without anyone pulling out a phone. Or how it felt to be able to read an entire article in one sitting. Or what I said in the paragraph above this one. Or whose text I was looking at right before I walked into that pole.

Or whatever. My point is, I feel like I can't live without you.

And that's why it's so hard for me to tell you that we need to break up.

INTRODUCTION

Let's get something clear from the start: the point of this book is not to get you to throw your phone under a bus. Just as breaking up with a person doesn't mean that you're swearing off all human relationships, "breaking up" with your phone doesn't mean that you're trading in your touch screen for a landline.

After all, there are lots of reasons for us to love our smartphones. They're cameras. They're DJs. They help us keep in touch with family and friends, and they know the answers to every piece of trivia we could ever think to ask. They tell us about the traffic and the weather; they store our calendars and our contact lists. Smartphones are amazing tools.

But something about smartphones also makes *us* act like tools. Most of us find it hard to get through a meal or a movie or even a stoplight without pulling out our phones. On the rare occasions when we accidentally leave them at home or on our desk, we reach for them anyway, and feel anxious each time we realize they're not there. If you're like most people, your phone is within arm's reach right this very second, and the mere mention of it is making you want to check something. Like social media. Or your messages. Or the news. Or your email. Or the weather. Or, really, anything at all.

Go ahead and do it. And then come back to this page and notice how you feel. Are you calm? Focused? Present? Satisfied?

Or are you feeling a bit scattered and uneasy, vaguely stressed without really knowing why?

Ever since the first iPhone was introduced in 2007, there have been signs that smartphones' effects on us might not be entirely positive. We feel busy but ineffective. Connected but lonely. The same technology that gives us freedom can also act like a leash—and the more tethered we become, the more it raises the question of who's actually in control. The result is a paralyzing tension: we love our phones for what they do, but we often hate the way they make us feel. And no one seems to know what to do about it.

The problem isn't just smartphones themselves (although phones and apps are certainly problematic). The problem is our relationships with them. Smartphones infiltrated our lives so quickly and so thoroughly that we never stopped to think about how we wanted to interact with them—or what effects our relationships with our phones might be having on our lives.

Even today, many of us have never stopped to think about which features and apps on our phones make us feel good and which make us feel bad. We've never stopped to think about why smartphones are so hard to put down or who might be benefiting when we pick them up. We've never stopped to think about what spending so many hours mindlessly scrolling might be doing to our brains or whether a device billed as a way to connect us to other people might be driving us apart.

"Breaking up" with your phone means giving yourself a chance to stop and think.

It means noticing which parts of your relationship are working and which parts are not. It means setting boundaries between your online and offline lives. It means becoming conscious of how and why you use your phone, your apps, and your

other devices—and recognizing that these technologies are manipulating *you*. It means undoing the effects that your phone has had on your brain. It means prioritizing real-life relationships over those that take place on screens.

Breaking up with your phone means giving yourself the space, freedom, and tools necessary to create a new, long-term relationship with it, one that keeps what you love and gets rid of what you don't. A relationship, in other words, that makes you feel healthy and happy—and over which you have control.

IF YOU'RE CURIOUS ABOUT THE status of your relationship with your smartphone, try taking this modified version of the Smartphone Compulsion Test, originally developed by Dr. David Greenfield, founder and medical director of the Center for Internet and Technology Addiction. Just circle the questions that apply to you. (If your phone isn't your biggest issue, feel free to swap in whatever device is causing you the most problems.)

1. Do you find yourself spending more time on your phone than you realize?

2. Do you find yourself mindlessly passing time on a regular basis by staring at your phone?

3. Do you seem to lose track of time when on your phone?

4. Do you find yourself spending more time texting, emailing, or posting and commenting online than you do talking to people in person?

5. Has the amount of time you spend on your phone been increasing?

6. Do you wish you could be a little less involved with your phone?

7. Do you sleep with your phone (turned on) under your pillow or next to your bed regularly?

8. Do you find yourself viewing and answering texts, messages, and emails at all hours of the day and night—even if it means interrupting other things you are doing?

9. Do you text, email, check or post to social media, or surf the internet while driving or doing other similar activities that require your focused attention and concentration?

10. Do you feel your use of your phone decreases your productivity at times?

11. Do you feel reluctant to be without your phone, even for a short time?

12. Do you feel ill at ease or uncomfortable when you accidentally leave your phone in the car or at home, have no service, or have a broken phone?

13. When you eat meals, is your phone always part of the table place setting?

14. When your phone rings, beeps, or buzzes, do you feel an intense urge to immediately check it?

15. Do you find yourself mindlessly checking your phone many times a day, even when you know there is likely nothing new or important to see?

Here's how Dr. Greenfield interprets people's scores:

1–2: Your behavior is normal but that doesn't mean you should live on your smartphone.

3–4: Your behavior is leaning toward problematic or compulsive use.

5 or above: It is likely that you have a problematic or compulsive smartphone use pattern.

8 or higher: You might consider seeing a psychologist, psychiatrist, or psychotherapist who specializes in behavioral addictions for a consultation.

If you are like most people, you have just discovered that you qualify for a psychiatric evaluation. I mean, come on. The only way to score below a 5 on this test is to not have a smartphone.

But the fact that these behaviors and feelings are so common does not mean that they are harmless or that this test is too dramatic. Instead, it's an indication that the problem may be more universal—and severe—than we think. To prove it, try this game: The next time you're in public, take a second to notice how many of the people around you—including children—are staring at their phones. Then imagine that instead of looking at their devices, those same people were smoking cigarettes or injecting drugs. Would the fact that half the people around you were engaged in these habits make them seem healthy or unconcerning? Or would it indicate a bigger issue?

I'm not suggesting that smartphones are always as addictive as drugs. But I do think that we're kidding ourselves if we don't acknowledge we have a problem.

Consider the following:

- Americans check their phones about 144 times per day.
- During waking hours, 83 percent of U.S. adults keep their phones near them almost all the time, and 72 percent of U.S. adults keep their phones within arm's reach while they sleep.
- Eighty-nine percent of Americans check their phones within ten minutes of waking.

- Forty-one percent of U.S. adults (including 62 percent of people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine) report that they are online "almost constantly."
- Phone usage has increased so much that we're giving ourselves repetitive strain injuries such as "texting thumb," "text neck," and "cell phone elbow."
- Half of U.S. adults agree with the statement "I can't imagine my life without my smartphone."
- Eighty-one percent of U.S. adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine think they're using their phone "too much."
- Fifty-seven percent of American adults describe themselves as being "addicted" to their phones.

I find these statistics horrifying. But they also hit close to home.

I'm a health and science journalist, and I have spent my career writing books and articles about subjects ranging from health and nutrition, diabetes, and endocrinology to mindfulness, positive psychology, meditation, happiness, and fun. Other than a brief stint as a Latin and math teacher, I've always been my own boss—and as anyone who's started their own business knows, surviving as a freelancer requires a lot of self-discipline, initiative, and focus. You'd think that my attention and time-management skills would be pretty well honed.

Instead, in the years after I got my first smartphone, I noticed that these skills seemed to have gotten worse. My attention span was shorter. My memory was weaker. My focus flickered. Sure, some of this could have been due to natural age-related changes in my brain. But the more I thought about it, the more I began

to suspect that there was an external factor at play—and that the factor was my phone.

In contrast to my adult life, my childhood was relatively screen-free. We had a television and I loved after-school cartoons, but I also spent a considerable number of hours on weekend mornings lying in bed reading *Anne of Green Gables* and/or staring at the ceiling. I entered high school around the same time that my family got its first dial-up modem, and quickly became enthralled by America Online—or, to be more specific, "teen chat" rooms, where I delighted in flirting with faceless strangers (who may or may not have actually been teenagers) and—dork alert—correcting people's grammar. But the connection was slow, and tied up our phone line, so it was impossible for it to dominate too much of my time. I graduated from college just as first-generation cell phones (that is, flip phones) were becoming widespread. I'm part of the generation, in other words, that came of age along with the internet: I'm old enough to remember the world before it but young enough that I can't imagine life without it.

I got my first smartphone in 2010, and before long I was carrying it with me everywhere and picking it up constantly—sometimes just for seconds and sometimes for hours at a time. In retrospect, other things started happening, too: I was reading fewer books, for example, and spending less time with friends and on hobbies that I knew brought me joy. My shortened attention span was making it harder for me to be present in these activities even when I did do them. But at the time, it didn't occur to me that these things might be connected.

Just as it can take a long time to realize that a romantic relationship is unhealthy, it took me a long time to realize that my

relationship with my phone might be negatively affecting me. Then, in 2016, I had an experience that shook me. I'd recently had my daughter, and I was up with her late one night when I had a momentary out-of-body experience—probably brought on by sleep deprivation—in which I saw the scene as if I were an outsider: There was a baby, staring up at her mother. And there was her mother, staring down at her phone.

I realized, in that instant, that I needed to make a change.

After that night, I began to notice just how much my phone had begun to control me. I realized that I often picked up my phone "just to check," only to resurface an hour later wondering where the time had gone. I'd respond to a text and then get caught in a thirty-minute back-and-forth that felt more demanding than an in-person conversation and yet left me feeling less fulfilled. I'd open an app with a sense of anticipation and then be disappointed when it didn't provide the satisfaction that I sought.

There wasn't anything inherently *wrong* about the things I was doing on my phone; what made me feel weird was how often I initiated them without thinking, how many real-life interactions and experiences they were supplanting, and how bad they made me feel. I reached for my phone to soothe myself, but I often crossed the line from soothed to numb.

I realized that anytime I had to wait for anything—a friend, a doctor, an elevator—my phone magically appeared in my hand. I found myself glancing at my phone in the middle of conversations, conveniently forgetting how annoyed I felt when other people did the same to me. I checked my phone constantly, presumably so that I didn't miss something important. But when I evaluated what I was doing, "important" was pretty much the last word that came to mind.

What's more, far from relieving my anxiety, checking my phone nearly always increased it. I'd look at my phone for a second before bed, notice a stressful email in my inbox, and then lie awake for an hour worrying about something that could easily have waited until morning. I'd reach for my phone to give myself a break, and then end up feeling exhausted and wired. I claimed not to have enough time to pursue interests outside of work, but was that true?

I worried that my increasing tendency to app-source so many aspects of my life—from getting directions to deciding where to eat—might be causing the smartphone version of the expression *When all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail*: the more I used my phone to navigate my life, the more I felt like navigating life *required* me to use my phone. And based on the behaviors of the people around me, I knew I wasn't alone.

So I decided to turn my personal curiosity into a professional project. I wanted to find out how my phone had weaseled its way into my most important relationships. I wanted to understand the mental, emotional, and physical effects that my phone time was having on me. I wanted to know whether my smartphone could be making me dumb.

MY FIRST ATTEMPTS AT INVESTIGATION didn't get very far. I was too distractible. In the earliest journal entry I wrote about smartphones, I jump from a rant against people who cross the street while texting to a description of an app that discourages phone use by entrusting you with the care of a digital forest to the admission that, in the midst of scribbling these disjointed thoughts, I had gone online and purchased three sports bras.

Once I'd finally managed to corral my concentration, I found evidence that there might indeed be a connection between my

diminished attention span and the time I was spending on my smartphone and other internet-connected wireless mobile devices (which some researchers quasi-jokingly refer to as WMDs).[*] Over time, scattering our attention between screens has the power to change both the structure and the function of our brains—including our abilities to form new memories, think deeply, focus, and absorb and remember what we read. Multiple studies have associated the heavy use of smartphones (especially when used for social media) with negative effects on neuroticism, self-esteem, impulsivity, empathy, self-identity, and self-image, as well as sleep problems, anxiety, stress, and depression.

I learned about the history of written language and how the act of reading itself—as in books, not listicles—can change the brain in ways that encourage deep thought. I looked into the way information is presented on the internet and how it threatens our attention spans and memories, and how smartphones and apps have been deliberately designed to be difficult to put down (and whom this benefits). I read about habits and addictions, neuroplasticity, and how smartphones are causing people to think, feel, and behave in ways that are typically associated with narcissistic personality disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

I also looked back at interviews I'd conducted over the many years I've spent as a freelance journalist, writing articles about

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[*] A more accurate title for this book might be *How to Break Up with Your Wireless Mobile Device*, given that a wide variety of potentially problematic devices are available to consumers and it won't be long before smartphones are supplanted by a new technology. I'm going to stick with the current title, but please feel free to swap out "phone" for whatever WMD you're currently in a relationship with.

mental and physical health. The deeper I got, the more I began to see my phone as my partner in a dysfunctional relationship: someone (or rather some*thing*) with the power both to make me feel bad about myself and to keep me in its thrall. And the deeper I got into my research, the more I became convinced that our attachment to our devices and their apps is not a trivial issue. It is an enormous problem—I'd go so far as to say that it's a behavioral addiction—and we need to do something about it.

No matter how hard I looked, however, I couldn't find the primary thing I sought: a solution. Some of the books and articles offered tips and tricks for how to reduce screen time through a combination of restrictions and restraint. But these felt like superficial treatments for a much more complicated problem.

What I realized was that we reach for our phones for many reasons, some of which are purely practical, some of which are subconscious, and some of which are surprisingly emotionally deep. Simply telling ourselves to spend less time on our phones and apps is the equivalent of telling ourselves to stop being attracted to people who are bad for us: it's easier said than done, and is probably going to require a good therapist—or at the very least, an extremely well-considered plan. But such a plan didn't seem to exist. So I decided to create one.

MY FIRST STEP WAS A PERSONAL experiment: my husband and I decided to do a digital detox by taking a twenty-four-hour break from phones and all other internet-enabled devices. As we sat down for dinner one Friday night, I lit a candle, we gave our phones one final glance, and then we turned them off—all the way off—for the next twenty-four hours. We avoided our tablets and computers, too. From Friday to Saturday night, we completely disconnected ourselves from screens.

It was an eye-opening experience, both in terms of how unusual it felt and how it made us feel. At first we were constantly tempted to reach for our phones—which we convinced ourselves was out of concern that we would miss an important phone call or text but, if we were being honest, was a sign of dependency, if not addiction. But we resisted our urges and, when the time came for us to turn our phones back on, we were surprised by how reluctant we were to do so—and how quickly our attitudes had shifted. Instead of being stressful, the experience had felt restorative, so much so that we decided to do it again.

We called the ritual a "Digital Sabbath," and by the second or third time we'd done it, we'd settled into a rhythm and worked out the kinks. Without our phones to distract us, time seemed to slow down. We went on walks. We read books. We talked more. I felt healthier and more grounded, as if I were getting back in touch with a part of myself that I hadn't even realized had gone missing. Interestingly, the effects of the Sabbath seemed to linger for several days afterward—a sort of digital hangover that felt *good*.

This made me want to make changes to my relationship with my phone during the rest of the week as well, to see if I could make these positive feelings more permanent. But how could I do this without going cold turkey? I didn't want my phone to control me, but I also knew I didn't want to give up my phone completely. That would mean throwing out the good with the bad.

Instead, I wanted balance. I wanted a new relationship with my phone, one in which I used my phone when it was helpful or enjoyable but didn't get sucked into spirals of mindless swiping. And in order to create a new relationship, I realized I needed to

take a step back from the one I was currently in. I needed time. I needed space. I needed to break up with my phone.

WHEN I TOLD PEOPLE I was breaking up with my phone, they didn't ask me what I meant or why I wanted to do it. Instead, they said the same thing, practically verbatim: "I need to do that, too."

I decided to enlist their help. I sent out an email recruiting volunteers and soon had a list of nearly 150 participants who ranged in age from twenty-one to seventy-three. They came from six countries and fifteen American states. There were teachers, lawyers, doctors, writers, marketers, publicists, homemakers, data scientists, computer programmers, editors, professional investors, nonprofit directors, and self-employed business owners—including a jewelry maker, a graphic designer, a music teacher, a personal chef, and an interior designer.

I created readings and assignments based on my research on mindfulness, habits, choice architecture, distraction, focus, attention, meditation, motivational interviewing, product design, behavioral addictions, neuroplasticity, psychology, sociology, and the history of disruptive technologies. After trying my ideas on myself, I sent them to my volunteers and asked for feedback and suggestions, which I then incorporated into the plan.

I was amazed by how candid people were in their responses and how many common themes emerged. By the end of the group experiment, I'd come to three conclusions. First, the problem of excessive phone usage is widespread: many people believe that they are addicted (their word) to their phones and that it's having devastating effects on their relationships, happiness, and health. Second, even though it can be difficult,

it *is* possible to create healthier long-term relationships with technology. And third, "breaking up" with your phone doesn't just have the potential to change your relationship with your devices. It can also change your life.

WE'RE NEVER GOING TO break up with our phones unless we think it's vitally important to do so. That's why the first half of this book, "The Wake-Up," is designed to freak you out. It's a synthesis of how and why our phones and devices are designed to be hard to put down, and what effect spending so much time on them is having on our relationships and our mental and physical health. In other words, it's the part of the breakup when your best friend pulls you aside at a bar one night and starts to itemize all the ways that your relationship isn't good for you, and at first you're like, "Leave me alone! It's my life!" but by the end of the conversation you realize that they're right and then panic because you don't know what to do.

The second half of the book, "The Breakup," tells you what to do. It's a 30-day plan designed to help you establish a new, healthier relationship with your phone (and technology in general). Don't worry—except for one twenty-four-hour period, I'm not going to ask you to be separated from your phone. Instead, I've provided a series of exercises meant to smoothly guide you through the process of creating a new, personalized relationship that is both sustainable and makes you feel good.

I've also included lots of quotations from people who've already gone through the process as inspiration. (I've made some light edits for length and clarity and have changed some of the names to protect their privacy.)

I should note that there are two groups of people who might be reading this book: people who bought it for themselves,

and people who had it handed to them by a concerned friend/parent/relative/roommate/spouse and may not be entirely appreciative of this "gift."

Second group, I'm sorry: it's never fun to have someone tell you they think you have a problem. But allow me to let you in on a secret: *whoever gave you this book probably needs to break up with their phone, too*. So I encourage you to invite your gift-giver to do the plan with you. The more pushback they give you, the more likely it is that they would benefit from it. (And feel free to invite other people, too: it'll make the breakup more fun and more effective.)

Regardless of who you are or why you're doing this, breaking up with your phone may be challenging. It requires self-reflection and the determination to wrest your life back from devices and apps that have been specifically designed to make it difficult to do so.

But as I and the thousands of other people who have broken up with their phones can attest, it is more than worth it. Not only will breaking up with your phone help you establish a healthier relationship with all forms of technology (both now and in the future), but it will have positive effects in areas of your life that you might never imagine it would influence. The more you notice your interactions with your phone, the more aware you'll become of the world *off* your phone—and of how much of it you've been missing. Breaking up with your phone will allow you to reconnect with a part of you that knows that the best moments of our lives don't happen on screens. And the sooner you can get in touch with it, the better.

*Every once in a while,
a revolutionary product comes
along that changes everything.*

—Steve Jobs, cofounder of Apple,
introducing the first iPhone in 2007

THE

WAKE-

UP

1

OUR PHONES AND APPS ARE DESIGNED TO HOOK US

The smartphone is the modern-day hypodermic needle.

—Anna Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*

IT'S TEMPTING TO THINK of smartphones as just one more technology in a long list of technologies that have freaked people out. Telegraphs, telephones, radios, movies, television, video games, even books—all caused panic when they were first introduced.

But Steve Jobs was right: smartphones really are different. They're different in a lot of good ways, obviously. But smartphones also talk back at us. They nag us. They disturb us when we're working. They surveil our movements, interactions, and behaviors. They demand our attention and reward us when we give it to them. Smartphones engage in disruptive and

intrusive behaviors that have traditionally been exhibited only by extremely annoying (if not downright creepy) people. What's more, they give us constant, unfettered access to the entire internet. And, unlike previous technologies, we keep them near us at all times.

Smartphones and their apps are also some of the first technologies specifically engineered to maximize the amount of time we spend on them. As Tristan Harris, a former Google product manager turned technological ethicist, points out, "Your telephone in the 1970s didn't have a thousand engineers on the other side of the telephone who were redesigning it . . . to be more and more persuasive." Sean Parker, who was the first president of Facebook (now Meta)—and who has since become, in his words, a "conscientious objector" to social media—has been even more blunt about the goal of social media apps in particular. In his words, "The thought process that went into building these applications . . . was all about 'How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?'"

Perhaps this is part of the reason that Jobs restricted his own children's access to his company's products. "They haven't used it," he said, when *New York Times* technology reporter Nick Bilton asked him if his children liked the iPad. "We limit how much technology our kids use at home."

The same is true of Microsoft founder Bill Gates and his ex-wife, Melinda French Gates, who didn't give their kids phones until they were fourteen, and of Chamath Palihapitiya, a former senior executive at Facebook, who told an audience at the Stanford Graduate School of Business that, when it comes to social media in particular, his kids are "not allowed to use that [expletive]." (After all, as Parker pointed out in his Axios interview, "God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains.")

"I don't generally want my kids to be sitting in front of a TV or a computer for a long period of time," Facebook and Meta founder Mark Zuckerberg told Fox News, when asked about his own approach to kids and technology. And it's not just CEOs who are concerned: much has been written about the popularity of tech-free Waldorf schools among parents who work in the tech industry, some of whom are even including "no phone" clauses in their contracts with their nannies, forbidding them from using devices in front of their children.

As Bilton concluded in his *New York Times* interview with Jobs, the fact that so many tech insiders "strictly limit their children's screen time" suggests that they "seem to know something that the rest of us don't."

An increasing number of mental health experts have concluded that this "something" is the risk of addiction. This might seem like a dramatic term to use, given that we're talking about a device, not a drug, but not all addictions are to drugs or alcohol—we can get addicted to behaviors, too, such as gambling. And addictions exist on a spectrum; it's possible to be addicted to something without it destroying your life.

Addiction can be defined as continuing to seek out something (for example, drugs or gambling) despite negative consequences. It's characterized by loss of control over the concerning substance or behavior, development of a tolerance (i.e., you need higher and higher levels to achieve the same effect), and withdrawal—often expressed as anxiety, irritability, insomnia, or dysphoria (unease or general dissatisfaction with life)—if you no longer have access to the substance or behavior.

That certainly would seem to describe many people's experiences with their smartphones and particular apps—indeed, the American Psychiatric Association points out that "technology

addiction is not limited to a specific demographic group, and it is increasing across diverse populations," and that "some people may be particularly vulnerable, especially those with high levels of internet use for socialization, education, and entertainment." (The same report also states that children and adolescents "may be particularly vulnerable to technological addiction because their brains are still developing.") According to the APA, the categories of apps that are most often involved in technology addiction are social media, gambling, internet gaming, shopping, and pornography.

But hey, if you don't like the word "addiction," that's fine—you can call it whatever you want. (And even those of us whose habits might not qualify as full-blown addictions likely are still exhibiting some of the same behaviors—and experiencing some of the same symptoms and mental health consequences.) The point is that many of the same brain chemicals and reward loops that drive addictions are also released and activated when we check our phones.

It's also important to note that revolutionary technologies don't just "come along," as Jobs put it; they're designed. As Parker pointed out, Silicon Valley insiders are quite aware of their products' addictive qualities, because they're engineered with the explicit goal of getting us to spend as much time and attention as possible on them. Why would tech companies do such a thing? Because, as we'll talk about in a minute, it's how they make money.

This is not to suggest that tech companies are out to deliberately hurt us or our children, and it's important to note that a lot of the features that make smartphones potentially problematic are the same features that make them easy to use, helpful, and enjoyable. Take away the possibility of getting hooked, and

you'd take away many of the reasons we like smartphones to begin with.

Nonetheless, the fact that so many tech insiders limit their own kids' exposure to technology suggests that they don't think the benefits always outweigh the risks—to the point that they feel the need to protect their families from the very devices and apps that they create. It's the Silicon Valley version of the drug dealer's adage "Never get high on your own supply."