

## Smart about Smart Phones

Jacob is a 17-year old teenager from Texas, but he is a little different from his friends. When he went to Panama to work for seven weeks, he decided not to take his cell phone. That meant he could not text, watch YouTube videos. He could not send or receive email for almost two months. Jacob spent his days working with children, going for walks, reading and writing. When he came back, he said, "It was the best decision I ever made."

Most teenagers in the U.S. are not like Jacob. They cannot imagine life without their phones. It is the first thing they look at in the morning, and it is the last thing at night. In 2015, a report by common sense media said that teens spend nearly 9 hours a day on their screens. This makes sense because that is where all their friends are. Teens' online activity worries their parents, but mothers and fathers spend a lot of time on screens too these days.

In less than 20 years, cell phones have become surprisingly important. According to the Pew Research Center, 95% of U.S. adults have a cell phone, and 95% have a smart phone. Half of them say they cannot live without their phone. They use it for work, to pay bills, get information, and, yes, to socialize and for entertainment.

Many companies work hard to create new apps and improve services. They want customers to be happy with the devices, and they are quite successful. The GPS feature is very useful for drivers. Phones help people find each other in airports or city streets. Phones save lives during emergencies. During Hurricane Harvey, people used phones to call for help. As a result, people are generally thankful for their phones. The phones are helpful, smart, useful friends.

Yet, some people are uncomfortable with their cell phone use, and social scientist also worry. The most dangerous example is the car. Drivers want to check their phone in the car. They know it is dangerous, but when they hear the phone beep, they feel a strong need to look. Scientists explain that checking messages gives the brain a short happy feeling.

The car is just one place where the phone creates problems. Phone use can hurt relationships, and phones can interfere with studies and work. When people stop listening to a friend because they are checking their messages, they hurt the friend. When a student or worker stops an activity to check the news, his brain loses focus. In fact, phones create some of the same problems as alcohol or drugs. In other words, they can be addictive. People can be addicted to games, to social media or simply to just checking messages.

Now there are apps that help people understand their relationship with their phone. One is called moment. People can do something on their phone and then think about it. Did they enjoy the game or activity? Quite often people say no. They might spend an hour on social media, but they feel bad about it.

Again, social scientists have an explanation. It is called Fear of Missing Out or FOMO. Teens, but also their parents and grandparents, often go on social media. They see their community online. They see pictures of vacations and parties. People are having fun. Someone alone at home often feels lonely or sad, but they cannot stop looking.

Researchers say it helps to write a comment. People feel better after posting a few words, but the best solution is to take a break. It may be difficult to put down the phone, but people generally feel better after a few minutes. Also, there are apps that can help. People can

use an app to stop messages for an hour or two. Other people try to sit quietly for a few minutes every day. This meditation practice helps them to separate from their screens.

Jacob's decision to leave his phone at home took strength. Jacob spent his summer with people and nature. Sometimes he was bored. Now back in the states, he is not going to give up his phone as he enters his last year of high school. His phone will keep him connected to his friends and teachers. However, he knows the feeling of life without phones, and he is not afraid of it.

### **Discussion**

How do you feel about your smart phone use?