

Does Smartphone Overuse Create Anxiety?

By ACSH Staff — March 16, 2016



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In just a few years the smartphone craze has taken hold of Americans everywhere. Its caught on so strongly because one of the device's most alluring features is its ability to connect people, over long distances and in a myriad of ways, at a reasonable cost.

However, studies and surveys continue to surface which collectively indicate that there may be two hidden costs that might plague an obsessive phone-user: anxiety and depression.

- In research conducted recently at the University of Illinois, students who reported high smartphone use also reported poor mental health.
- [One study](#) [2] released last year by the University of Winnipeg found similar effects of phone use, where social anxiety and being prone to addiction were strong signs of frequent cell phone use. It found that anxiety increased when people could see their phones but couldn't use them.
- [Another study](#) [3] found those addicted, or possibly addicted to mobile phones, are less-equipped to deal with unsavory emotions than non-addicts. This may show that those with anxiety or depression tend to overuse phones, rather than phones causing anxiety or depression.

So, could over-users experience fear in connection to their phones? Even before beginning her study to find out, Tayana Panova, a 2014 Illinois graduate, thought so.

“I perceived the use of mobile phones on campus as widespread, constant and excessive,” Panova said to [Chicago Tonight](#) [4], a PBS television program. “Intuitively, I felt that this intense attachment to devices had to have some kind of negative psychological consequence, and I wanted to conduct a study that would uncover whether that was the case.”

Panova and her psychology professor, Alejandro Lleras, conducted two studies to find out. They first gave questionnaires to over 300 U. of I. students asking questions related to phone use and mental health.

“What we found is participants that tend to score high on questionnaires of maladaptive cellphone

use tend to score poorly on mental health questionnaires,” said Lleras. “They develop a high degree of anxiety in their lives or negative effects on life like depression.”

As of 2015, almost 70 percent of American adults and 90 percent of young adults own a smartphone, according to [the Pew Research Center](#) [5].

Panova and Lleras then conducted experiments to test the students’ stress responses with and without access to their phones. The two found that the students with their phones used them and coped better with stress than those without phones. Panova calls this use of the phone a “security blanket effect” because it works to comfort people during times of anxiety.

“This suggests that individuals may use devices while experiencing negative emotional states, thereby practicing a kind of ‘avoidance coping,’” said Panova. She and Lleras concluded that long-term phone coping of this kind could cause further mental health problems.

"It may be that individuals with higher anxiety [or] depression use devices more intensively," Lleras said, "or that using devices more intensively can eventually lead to the development [or] progression of anxiety [or] depression."

These findings should give us pause, but given the data so far it's hard to be conclusive on this issue. But, as we say about most behavioral choices, everything in moderation. Therefore, we can see how putting down the smartphone regularly and disconnecting a bit might be worthy advice until more on this topic is known.

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