



# HOLD THE PHONE

PHONE BREAK

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We know too much scrolling leaves us feeling horrible, but we just can't stop. Neuroscientist TJ Power tells Bridgid Moss how to get our phone habit under control.

**W**e're all at it. In 2022, Aussies spent an average of 5.67 hours per day on our smartphones. And our tiny screens are not only taking our time, but stealing our attention, too. When I meet neuroscientist TJ Power, he suggests I check the 'pick-ups' logged on my iPhone (in Settings/Screen Time). I discover that, by 5pm, I've picked up my phone an eye-watering 85 times. That's not the most he's seen from clients, he says: "Often people do 150 pick-ups a day, 75 by lunch."

Quite apart from the time wasted (two hours scrolling a day equals one full month per year!), our screen time isn't making us feel any better, as evidenced by Oxford Dictionary's word of 2024, 'brain rot'. It means the slump in your mental state that comes from overconsuming content. Hitting home? You need TJ's plan to break up with (or at least cut down on) your phone.

"Every single pick-up is a dopamine hit," he says, "especially social media and online shopping. Phone addiction is happening to almost every single human in the world. Even the 80-year-olds are hooked now." That's because dopamine is a feel-good brain chemical – up to a point. "The interesting thing about dopamine is that its function is for survival. It's why human beings evolved to find food, procreate, find safety," he continues. "Every time we worked to light a fire, find food, build a hut, protect children, our brains released dopamine, which made us feel good. Dopamine reinforces positive experiences to make us do them again."

"However, dopamine evolved to be slowly 'earned' through effort," he adds. Right now, as you read this magazine, the effort of reading means your dopamine is going up slowly. "After you have concentrated for a period of time, maybe five to 10 minutes, you will notice a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment arise." This is you 'earning' pleasure and your brain likes it. "For our ancestors, it could take four hours of hunting to achieve this kind of dopamine increase," says TJ. ▶

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# OUR OVERSTIMULATING LIVES

“The problem is, in the modern world we’re getting instant hits of dopamine from so many places – from sugary foods, alcohol, cigarettes, vaping and drugs, pornography, gambling,” says TJ. “But, in particular, we’re now all getting them from our phones. Smartphones are a disaster for dopamine. They’re like having a bag of sugar in your pocket that you can keep dipping into.” The catch is, ‘what goes up must come down’. In an attempt to get back into balance after a dopamine spike, the brain will drop dopamine levels to below your baseline level, “making you feel even worse than before you started scrolling!”

You’re left feeling demotivated, distracted and more prone to procrastination. “This is your brain sending a message that you need to change your behaviour,” says TJ. But, conversely, you’re also left wanting to repeat the dopamine-spiking behaviour – so you reach for your phone, for the 150th time that day. If you keep overdoing the dopamine spikes, TJ says, over time, you’ll burn out your dopamine system, like an over-revved car, and be left feeling increasingly dull and aimless.

Sound familiar? TJ knows what this feels like. In fact, his working life was inspired by it. In his young adult years, he describes chasing dopamine highs. “I started drinking, smoking cigarettes early, then partying. I hit my breaking point aged 21.” He got himself back on track with his self-invented program of abstinence. After taking an MSc in Health Science, he launched a course called The DOSE Effect, with science-backed ways to support brain chemicals and mental health (which now is a new book of the same name).

Don’t blame yourself for phone overuse, he stresses, because phone apps are designed to hook us. “Don’t judge yourself. Tech is pleasurable and very tempting. [Video game] *Candy Crush*, for example, is pure rubbish for the brain. Shopping is overstimulating, too,” he says. “It’s like hunting. Yet, a lot of people can spend hours filling a basket and then deleting it.

This confuses the brain – a rise of dopamine but then no goal accomplished at all, followed by a fall in dopamine.” But, he adds, “it’s the rise of TikTok and short-form videos like YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels that’s the most potent online way to send our brain’s dopamine in peaks and troughs. Our brains just can’t deal with them,” TJ says. Ready for a call to action? Try his phone health plan below.

## The DOSE phone plan

### The night before

**Decide what your** phone rules will be, the times when you’ll allow yourself to scroll. The number one rule is: do not pick up your phone first thing. TJ allows himself to look at his phone at 10am, 3pm and after dinner (and always after cleaning up) at 8pm.

### Set up your phone

**Put the screen time** widget on the first page of your phone, so you can see your usage on a daily basis. One hour a day is great, two hours a day is healthy, three hours a day “is when you begin to hit the upper limit of what your brain will be able to manage,” TJ says. Turn off notifications (except for emergencies), as these create cravings for your phone. Move your social media apps into a folder on your second screen, to make them less accessible. “You have to have physical separation from your phone as it’s impossible to resist. Leave it upstairs or downstairs, wherever you are not.”

### Upon waking

**Start the day** by doing things that take effort. Make your bed. Brush your teeth. Splash your face with cold water. In fact, cold water can increase your brain’s baseline levels of dopamine, TJ says. So have a cold shower or even a cold swim. Instead of scrolling, plan to read a few pages of a book.

### Next

**You can either** go outside for some sunlight or have a shower and get dressed. But do not check your phone until you’ve done at least one of these!

### During the day

**Plan in some** natural dopamine builders. These include making deep social connections, or eating nutritious food. They can also be things that build your focus, such as reading books. Working towards any goals is really important, too. Or try doing things that help raise your discipline. TJ is a big



**99.2%**  
 The percentage of Aussies that are terrified of being without their phone.  
SOURCE: MONASH UNIVERSITY

## Work for your pleasure

To get your dopamine system functioning properly, you need effort or physical work to correspond to any pleasure rises, and you need the rises to be a slow burn rather than a firework. "In the modern world, this has to be a conscious thing that takes discipline," TJ says. If you can do this, "you'll feel productive and motivated. When you do the things that are good for you, you'll feel excited about your life."

So, how do we start? By phone fasting; that is, only picking it up at certain times. "In order to be able to do this, you'll need to remove the phone from you physically," he says. In particular, you need to avoid it in the mornings. "Lots of brain regeneration happens during the night. Your brain wakes up ready to attack the day." So, that's definitely not the time to scroll. "Do you want to go on your phone first thing? Yes. Do you want to feel happy this morning? Also, yes. But these cannot both happen!" he says.

Instead, aim to raise your dopamine gently by putting in effort or working towards goals. "Nowadays, we're not in the pursuit of survival, because that's all taken care of for us. But you can still be in the pursuit of challenging goals, such as keeping your home clean and tidy, working hard, putting effort into cooking."

"Then, if you do scroll later in the day, you'll get an even more pleasurable experience," he continues. "Delaying it only makes it better." Don't expect to be perfect. "There are, of course, going to be moments when your new healthy habits slip, or the temptation of quick dopamine takes hold, and that's okay. That's part of living in the 21st century."

"At these moments, check in with how you're feeling and specifically connect with how each of your decisions are impacting your motivation, relationships, energy levels and mood. The more you can feel how the positive and negative behaviours in your life are affecting you, the smarter your daily decisions will become." **P**

fan of cleaning your space to get your dopamine up. Try cleaning one room or reorganising your workspace. "Each time you have to empty the dishwasher, wash your dishes or take the bins out, see these tasks as valuable to your mental health," he says. "Notice the feeling of satisfaction." Exercise is also a big dopamine builder; if you can get outside to do it, that's a bonus. Every time you get an urge to pick up your phone to get some quick dopamine outside your allotted phone times, resist it.

Each time you do this, your willpower will get stronger. "The less you engage with these quick dopamine behaviours, the more motivated and positive your brain will become." If you can, take a walk in nature. "Remember, the low mood, depression and/or anxiety we feel from overuse of our phone is our brain trying to course correct our behaviour." Everyone hates hearing that message, he says, so we keep looking for dopamine hits. "During the DOSE plan, we ask people to do a 30-minute walk in nature without their phone. I say, 'Get

bored! Let some of that negative stuff come into your head, because if you never hear it, it's going to keep knocking on the door, and knocking louder and louder."

### At 5PM or 6PM

**This is a really important time to do something to give you another gentle climb of dopamine.** This could be exercising, socialising or, again, organising and cleaning your home before dinnertime.

### In the evening

**Plan in at least an hour without your phone, whether it's eating dinner or watching TV.** If you're sitting in front of a TV, you may find that you feel bored or frustrated without double screening. "But five to 10 minutes into watching something slower-paced, your brain will settle and stop striving for that big spike in dopamine."

### Bedtime

**Don't go to bed too late – good sleep is really important for supporting dopamine levels, too.**



*The DOSE Effect: Small Habits to Boost Your Brain Chemistry* by TJ Power (HarperCollins, \$36.99) is out now.