

My iPhone addiction was making me a terrible mom

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I had become an addict.

No, I wasn't desperate for coffee, or counting the minutes until bedtime so I could pour myself a glass of Merlot. I was addicted to my iPhone.

It started innocently enough. I would check e-mail throughout the day, mostly for work. Soon I found myself checking Facebook first thing in the morning, and sneaking peeks at my blog before going to bed. Eventually I reached the point where I'd even check my weather app for a fix. It became common for me to hollowly promise my kids "just one more minute" while sitting in the grocery store parking lot, the kids strapped impatiently in their car seats, while I desperately scrolled past LinkedIn invitations and kitchenware sales, looking for something I couldn't define.

These were not my proudest moments.

The turning point came when my essay about why I decided to return a tablet my 5-year-old got for Christmas was published. I got a lot of "feedback" about my choice, mostly from irate readers convinced I was living in a cave. But there was another strain of criticism I couldn't ignore. Wasn't I being a tad hypocritical? Could I really expect my daughter to stay off the screen when I was glued to it 24/7 myself? All those fears I had for her_about losing touch with the people around her_weren't they just as valid for me?

Awakened to the issue, I started to pay attention. To my daughter's face when I dismissed her with yet another "hold on" while checking the status of a diaper order. To my toddler's anger as I grabbed the phone "one last time" before reading him a story. Things had gotten out of hand. I wasn't being the mom I wanted to be, or the mom they deserved.

And so I embarked on an experiment. I decided to quit my phone — cold turkey — for one week. I wanted to see if I really needed all that connectivity — if I'd be a more present wife and mother without a screen weighing me down. I made a resolution: no texting, no surfing, no games, no apps. I told family and friends that I wouldn't be texting, and I was only online on my computer to deal with work when the kids were at school or were asleep.

I was actually looking forward to disconnecting, to freeing myself of my small, backlit master. I discovered a few things that week, several of which surprised me. Here is what I learned during my week of digital sobriety.

1. *My kids notice — sort of.* No, they didn't exuberantly cry out, "Mom, we're so glad you've chosen to forgo the trappings of the digital age to create meaningful experiences with us during our formative years." They continued their normal routines of bickering and knocking things over. But I sensed a lightness in their spirits_and, more palpably, less disappointment and anger at the time I was stealing from them. They seemed to communicate more, to hold back less. Suddenly there were more spontaneous dance parties, more questions about the world around them. It was nice to feel more present and more involved — whether they noticed or not.

2. *I've forgotten how to focus.* Without my phone, I could suddenly watch entire TV shows uninterrupted, or have long, undistracted conversations with my spouse. All of which, frankly, made me antsy. Somewhere along the way, my ability to focus for long periods of time had vanished. Without that screen in my hand, one-hour dramas felt like weekend marathons; long car rides seemed interminable. As a child, my family used to drive all over the country while I contentedly read novels or played in the backseat. The fact that I now needed a device to keep me occupied was not a happy discovery.

3. *Distraction is an excuse.* My kids inspire me. I love watching my son proudly count to 10, or my daughter beam with delight after shoveling snow all by herself. But some moments are less exciting, like watching Thomas the Tank Engine chug around the Island of Sodor, or braiding Elsa's hair for the eighth time that day. In those moments, the iPhone becomes my excuse to avoid the sometimes tedious parts of parenthood, to disappear temporarily into my own world. But my kids don't need a mom with a little escape plan. I'm not saying Mommy shouldn't have her own interests_but when I'm with them, they deserve my presence, whether I'm thrilled with the current activity or not.

4. *I'd been hoarding my attention.* There's a reason they call it paying attention. Attention is a valuable commodity, something precious you offer someone in exchange for their time, their excitement, their everyday moments no one else gets to share. When I started paying attention, tiny details came into focus, like my son's new-found love of turning book pages, or my daughter's



A woman concentrates on her phone

sudden willingness to embrace "Frozen's" Anna as well as Elsa. And I could see pride in their eyes, a sense of importance as I listened to and really heard them. For too long I had been paying attention to an inanimate object. Fortunately, I've found people much more deserving of it.

5. My guilt isn't limited to a screen. And yet, my experiment couldn't solve everything. I thought that once I ditched the phone, I would be a whole new mom, undistracted and focused on my family. Unfortunately, while one source of distraction disappeared, others remained. I still felt my mind wandering toward work during conversations about Play-doh, or considering summer camp options during episodes of Justice League. As it turns out, being in the moment is more than a weeklong endeavor. It's a constant series of decisions, a never-ending exercise — with a screen or without.

Eventually, the week ended and I began using my iPhone once again. But something had changed. I had changed. I didn't want to go back to my obsessive behavior. I wanted to focus on being better, more aware, more present as a mom. I wanted to give more of my attention to my children, to conquer my distraction — and if I couldn't, I wanted them to see me trying. So now I use my phone only when I'm working, or after bedtime. Without a screen, it's just me, faults and all and I'm working on them.

And, happily, there's no app for that.

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