

CELL PHONE ADDICTION

Me, My Cell, and I!

How many of you have your cell phone close by? How often have you looked at it today or sent out messages? Do you sleep with it close by? Does it accompany you to the dinner table or to the bathroom? Is it there to greet you when you awake? Be honest now! **How many of you cannot do without your cell, for even one day!**

I know the stress levels just went up when you thought of doing without your cell phone. After all, it has been your constant companion, keeping you in touch with your friends, your family and the outside world, at just the touch of the screen, without having to go anywhere. The use of the cell has even invaded churches, as many priests and pastors have their sermons written on this device, which speakers also use for their key note addresses at important conferences.

Therefore, the recent newspaper report of a teenager who chopped his mother and severely wounded her when she took away his cell phone should alert us to the fact that this device, despite its benefits, has become one of the most insidiously harmful inventions of this century. Many persons have become addicted to their cellphone. Like all addictions, the emotional consequences can be devastating. **Addiction creates changes in the chemistry of the brain which further drives the compulsion for the behaviours**, somewhat akin to substance abuse. There is the constant need for stimulation and cell phone use offers this to a great extent.

Children and teenagers are on their cell phones more than eight hours per day in some instances. Research shows that excessive phone use puts a person's mental health at risk, and increases in mental illness among youth seemed to coincide at the same time when cell phones became a common accessory. Kids became more prone to mood disorders, anxiety, depression and even suicide. While correlation does not necessarily imply causation, one has to look at the impact of cell phone use on the average child or teenager.

As a parent, you may have struggled with this issue at some point. I know that I did. Many years ago, when I took away my teenager's phone for refusing to comply with a request, she gave me a solid push that startled us both, as this was the first time that she had become physical with me. Even though it never happened again, I often questioned if I could have possibly approached the situation differently.

As parents, some of us want to be in touch with our kids right away, and this is justified given our society that has become so unsafe. But how do we create a balance here? Like all things, anything that is done in excess will have negative consequences. We buy our children the cell phones, the television sets, the video games, all stimulating devices that appeal to them, more than their '*boring parents and families*', and then we expect them to exercise control and be emotionally distant from these devices.

Some of the solutions seem to be to provide other opportunities for young people that can be equally stimulating. Whilst some parents may do this, many have no social or physical activities in place for their children and the cell phone has become the new babysitter, the constant companion and close friend of the child and adolescent. *Me, my cell and I!* Have we modelled appropriate cell phone use ourselves? What do our kids see us do?

There are parents who are walking on the streets and talking on their mobiles, with their children lagging behind; those who use the phone while driving or who take calls at the family get-togethers. **If we want our children to do it differently and exercise restraint when told to do so, then we also have to model self-control.**

The cell phone is a relatively safe place to socially connect with their peers, to seek information and to do activities when used in moderation. When this lifeline is removed, there will be an emotional backlash and withdrawal symptoms.

What are the limits on phone usage that you have put in place, to help your child or teenager to learn self-regulation skills?