



Celling Out to Mobile Phones

For years, I have looked incredulously at the increasingly ginormous group of men and women with cell phones super-glued to their ears. I see them everywhere: rushing along 8th Avenue in New York, getting out of their cars on Mission Street in San Francisco, looking at the window displays along Michigan Avenue in Chicago.

The same questions always run through my head. Who on earth are these people talking to? What topic can't wait until these chatty Cathys and Carls get home? How did these bloviators survive before cell phones became ubiquitous in the mid-1990s?

To be honest, I have always felt vaguely superior to nonstop jabberers. As a professional communicator who closely follows social trends, I know that psychologists regard excessive cell phone use as an unhealthy avoidance behavior. With perfectly interesting people at the next table in a restaurant or at a post office, talkaholics frenetically dial family, friends, and acquaintances to get out of a real face-to-face conversation.

Until recently, I used my cell only for outgoing messages. I rarely gave my mobile number to others because, plain and simple, I just don't want to converse 24/7. Then, last week, I forgot to pack my cell for a business trip to Atlanta. It was a nightmare. I felt as if I had been thrown into a rehab for cell phone addicts and was being forced to go cold turkey.

My first taste of the unpleasantness occurred when I tried to use a pay phone – remember those? – at the Atlanta airport to take part in a 5 p.m. conference call scheduled by clients in New York. Well, guess what? The corporate computer system was programmed to reject dial-ins from public places.

Surprised but undaunted, I next asked a non-native English speaking taxi driver if I could borrow his cell. He refused – at least I think he did. For all I know, he may have thought I was asking him to hand over his hard-earned savings. And he may have told me he was driving a cab to pay his tuition to medical school.

My final attempt to connect with the New Yorkers occurred in Fleabag Hotel, which I had booked before seeing the housekeeping staff continually dousing the place with insecticide. The night desk clerk said only the daytime staff could authorize long-distance calls. At this point, I went into full-blown cell phone withdrawal, made obvious by profuse sweating and shaking. According to numerous articles on the Internet, I discovered that my reaction is extremely common.

So how can you and I avoid being so consumed? Here are some suggestions I gleaned Friday and Saturday from research while trying to cope with the sudden realization that I'm more dependent on cell phones than I had thought:

- Resist all-or-nothing behavior. Unlike alcoholics and drug addicts, cell phone junkies don't have to swear off completely. The trick is to declare limits – and stick with them. Next week, I'm going to turn on my mobile just three times a day. So please call me only at 9 a.m., 1 p.m., or 5 p.m. Otherwise, I'm going to pretend to be too busy to talk. Can you say napping?
- Reserve cell phone usage for business. I think immediate access to work associates is the most powerful contribution of mobile technology. On the other hand, I suspect your spouse would prefer occasional communication where you can kiss, hug, and, well, you know.



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- Avoid relying on a single communications form. Sure, cell phones offer a few unique advantages. They include being able to call your room mate from the supermarket to recheck favorite brands of peanut butter, coffee, and ice cream. But face-to-face and telephone conversations have distinct pluses, too. A big one is the ability to alter the tone of your voice to fit the topic.
- Disconnect one day a week. Starting next week, I'm hoping to disengage from all business technology every Sunday. If you want to test my resolve, send me an email that afternoon. If I respond before midnight, please don't blab that I failed to make it through the first day. I'm terrified readers will show up at my home to do an intervention.
- Practice common courtesy. Personally, I think making and taking phone calls while dining with companions is the height of poor manners. Unless there's an emergency, turn your cell off in the company cafeteria, a public restaurant, and your own kitchen. Otherwise, you may as well tell fellow diners that "The person on the phone is much more important to me than you are."
- Examine your deeper motives. For years, I've theorized that incessant cell phone users must desperately fear being alone and facing themselves. Otherwise, why would they make dozens of calls where the primary message is some version of the distinctly non-urgent "What's up?"
- Expect relapse. It's always difficult to adhere to behaviors counter to the norm. So don't beat yourself to a pulp if you occasionally break your own rules. Instead of seeing yourself as permanently celling out to an unhealthy trend, get back to the new boundaries you've set for yourself. Now please excuse me. I need to take this call.

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