

**Kia Handley:**

Once upon a time, the only phone you had was when you were at home, it sat on the wall or on a phone table. And the only thing it would do is ring for phone conversations. That was it.

How times have changed! Now, that thing you call a phone is actually more like a computer there's games and social media sites, places to shop, to learn really, to do whatever you want.

So how much control does your phone have over you and how is that affecting your relationship? Relationship Coach Tara Whitewood is here to talk about this this morning. Good morning.

**Tara Whitewood:**

Good morning!

**Kia Handley:**

Are our phones addictive?

**Tara Whitewood:**

Absolutely addictive. And you know, we laugh about it a little bit, but it's actually literally true.

The, and it's not the phone, let's be clear. It's not the actual, the phone. Right. It's the apps that we put on it as well.

**Kia Handley:**

Right. So it's not the actual brick of plastic in front of us. Yeah.

**Tara Whitewood:**

Yeah. I mean, we talk about science, but it depends what you put on it.

So the, the positive, positive social stimulus in the world is rewarded by our brains. We get a dopamine hit when we have this positive social stimulus. And that's important because we're a social species. As we talk about all the time, you know, we need to build connections amongst ourselves to survive.

But what happens is that our phones leverage the same neural circuitry that, that that pokie machines do and the cocaine do. And does, and that, that positive social stimulus becomes things like likes and notifications and shares and comments and all of those little bells and whistles that go off on your phone stimulate that circuitry.

So we do get addicted to that little dopamine rush that we get when you see a little notification pop up on your screen or a banner, or, you know, whatever it is that tells you that someone is engaging with you

**Kia Handley:**

At the same time, it's, it's harder to separate because it is how, where, especially right now staying connected to a lot of people.

**Tara Whitewood:**

Yeah, I think you're exactly right. And like I said, you know, it's not the phone.

And I believe that that technology has it's completely transformed the way that we do everything, the way we work, the way we learn how productive we are, the way we connect, you know, where we can work. So I think that, you know, on the, on the scale of things, having a phone, like that is a wonderful

thing. We just really need to be able to work out how are we going to use those tools so that it creates positivity in our lives and doesn't detract from our relationship.

**Kia Handley:**

Does it affect all of us in the same way?

**Tara Whitewood:**

I don't think it does.

I think some of us are wired a little bit differently, the same as with any addiction that you're looking at.

Some people respond to those inputs differently. And some of us also choose to respond to it differently. So I think that when it comes to using those apps and using those tools, if you make a choice in advance to not let them not let the tool drive you, but to use the tool in a way that you like, you can set up a whole bunch of settings on your phones and iPads and computers and whatever it is so that you do get to interact with it in a way that's really healthy.

**Kia Handley:**

Mm. Well, what, what are the impacts of, of time on the phone?

**Tara Whitewood:**

Yeah, there's, I mean, infinite, but I'm only going to get a touch on seven and talk about what so the impacts are ;

1. for our **attention and cognition**, we have a much smaller window of focus. We're distracted a lot by our phones.
2. The second one is your **physical and mental health** is, can be impacted by your use of phone.
3. **social media and the way that we make sense of the world**. So our phone becomes and social media becomes the lens through which we are making sense of what's happening in the world.
4. **Political and election type issues** are really impacted. And we're seeing that, you know, well, we're not seeing that more and more. I think we're seeing that uncovered more and more over the years
5. it's a real influence on **systemic oppression**, but amplifying the, the ways that we oppressed different populations.
6. And it hasn't really big impact on **our next generation** on the way that children perceive themselves and the way that they are then able to go forward in their lives. I mean, I'm grateful every day that there, there wasn't social media, when I was a teenager of the horror of having that, you know, on my permanent record.
7. The one that I really want to look at with you today is **the impact on social relationships**, clear. There's a way that I'm using our phones can really be, can really detract from the people that we love in our lives.

**Kia Handley:**

Yeah. All right. So let's start there. Where can some of those pressure points be around relationships and time on tech and phones and everything that comes with that?

**Tara Whitewood:**

Yeah. So the impact that it **reduces, the trust** that you have in, in your relationship, you either can't trust someone to, to be, you know, available and present for you.

And I also see a lot with my clients that there's some implications of trust with the way that people message someone else or, you know, who are they talking to on social media? There's a bit of **jealousy** can kick in.

It **reduces the empathy that you have for other people**, because there's this layer of separation now between me and the actual person. So, you know, you've seen the huge **increase in bullying** because now we have these different platforms where you can do it with no real life consequences for what you're saying or the way that you're behaving.

And it **reduces the presence**. I mean, we've all spent time with someone who is constantly checking their phones for notifications, or, you know, having a half conversation with you because the other eyes on their phone waiting for whatever it is they're waiting for.

And so it has really big implications for our social relationships and for the way that we connect with our loved ones.

**Kia Handley:**

All right. So what's the solution here? How do we approach this in a, in a way that's healthier, a little bit balanced.

**Tara Whitewood:**

So I have two solutions for you, but I also want to say, we really need to start shifting the responsibility in the way that we talk about these issues from individual engagement, with the tools to the companies, who've created them and the policymakers who allow them to just flourish with no rules. But that's my little rant.

I'll put that to the side in terms of solutions, there are sort of two ways you can look at it.

**You can have a tech solution**, which is the way you engage with the apps in the phone. And that can include things like really simple things, actually putting your phone to gray scale. So you now looking at a black and white screen and you don't need to do that all the time. You can put a shortcut on it and you can do that sort of in-between when you're actually using the tools that has a really big impact on people's phone use and reduces significantly.

Now you can turn off the notifications, that's super important. And even if you don't want to send them completely off just modify them in the settings so that you don't have them pop up on your phone. You need to actually go into the app to check whether you have notifications. And you can, you know, turn off a lot of them.

One of the things that Facebook is doing over the over time is they're increasing their criteria for notification. So, you know, originally it was only like if your friends liked or commented or something similar, now it's someone posts in a group or, you know, there's an event nearby you. So they're really increasing the notifications, which is kicking in that feedback loop. So turn them off, please.

And think about how much of your waking hours in your life you want to spend on your phone?

I've done a little calculation for myself. You know, if I'm awake for say 15, 16 hours a day, and I spend this much time on my phone, what percentage of my waking hours in my lifetime am I on my phone for? And that was a bit of a horror show for me. It just really put in perspective, if I'm doing this, then I'm not doing all these other things.

So there are lots of tech solutions out there, a great place to have a look for. There is a website called the [Center For Humane Technology](#).

They have a [whole series of suggestions in terms of plugins and strategies](#) that I really recommend you go and have.

**Kia Handley:**

Okay. Does it have to be like, cause you know, we are talking kids today, young kids, but then teens come to mind as well. Does it have to be a whole of family, couple relationship, household approach? Can everyone be involved?

**Tara Whitewood:**

Yeah. So I think now we're sort of **heading into the relational solutions**.

And one of the tricky things is finding that balance between asking someone, making a request for someone's time and attention and energy, and then the opposite sort of end of that scale or the extreme end of that scale becomes policing someone else's behavior.

So I think in terms of the relational solutions and the family agreements it's really good to structure time together. So like you said, you know, say in your family, I don't know between six and 8:00 PM, no devices or whatever, whatever works for you. Maybe you have one day a week where you completely no, and you're all present to each other, whatever works well in your household.

But part of that is having a bit of clarity about communicating what it is that you want rather than what you don't want. So rather than saying, you're always on your phone, say I'd really like to spend some time connected to you. Can we have a game of cards or, you know, go for a run or whatever the thing is, you're, you're making a request for your partner's presence instead of complaining about what they're doing.

**Kia Handley:**

Tara, always great to chat. Good to know that the phone isn't actually the problem. That's what we're taking from this... It's the things that are on the phone, which we control!

**Tara Whitewood:**

Exactly right. You're in control.

**Kia Handley:**

We are in control of that, Tara. Thank you.

We'll try it again next week.

Tara Whitewood there, Relationship Coach with The Sugar Doctor and your regular guest here on ABC at Newcastle mornings, talking through tech, relationship, what's going on at your place and perhaps in your brain as well as we find our lives so heavily entwined with a little computer that you sit in your back pocket.