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# Introduction

*"There is no new thing under the sun."*

—Ecclesiastes 1:9

Paddington Station, if you've never passed through it, is a beautiful old station to the west of central London. Built in 1838, it was frequently bombed during World War II. Many troops passed through the station en route to the battlefields of Europe and beyond, and London children were evacuated from here during that same war. Its most famous "son" is undoubtedly he who bears (pun intended) the station's name—Paddington Bear. Four Tube lines pass through it as do many trains journeying west of England and beyond. Being an Irish native, I often take a Paddington train home, connecting to a ferry from Wales to Rosslare, a port on the east coast of Ireland. With a high-speed rail link to Heathrow Airport, Paddington Station also serves as a jumping-off point for many global travelers.

As you'd imagine, at such a cosmopolitan confluence point, the people-watching at Paddington is exquisite. Recently, I arrived there with a luxurious 45 minutes to spare ahead of my train's departure. I sat down and looked around and above me, taking in the beautiful vaulted roof, the stately old clock. Fifty years ago it probably didn't look much different. I imagined winding that beautiful clock back several decades and wondered what the people around me would have been doing then. Tourists would have wandered around taking pictures, someone would be checking the horse-racing results in a newspaper, another studiously poring over the stocks and shares. I imagined attractive strangers mingling glances, someone admiring their reflection in a pocket mirror, another surreptitiously biting their nails, a couple arguing.

Bringing my attention back to IRL (in real life) on a summer's day well into the twenty-first century, I gazed around at my contemporaries, and most people (old, young, black, white, male, female)—let's say at least 80 percent of them—were looking down intently at their phones. However, what they were doing on those devices was likely not dissimilar to what engaged their forebears of half a century ago. Perhaps some of them were even there 50 years ago doing the same thing but in a different way! As it states in Ecclesiastes: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun."

Everything we can do on our smartphone, we could do previously in another way offline. But we now have Tinder or Grindr to check out attractive strangers, Instagram to see who's admiring us, a multitude of apps and news sites to update us on how our horse/investment is doing, and WhatsApp to spar or flirt remotely with our partner.

It's interesting how smartphones have been scapegoated for all society's ills when most of the behaviors they enable have been around for millennia—mating, narcissism, commerce, envy, lust. The difference now is availability and access. Take mating, or the pursuit of mating, for instance. In a primitive society our potential for partners was limited by geography. Now, with Tinder and its ilk we can set our conquest visions globally.

There has been an enormous pushback on tech corporations of late, and with good reason. They have invested billions in R&D to make their devices and apps stickier, more addictive, so that many of us cannot bear to be without them. However, blaming the tech companies for how we choose to spend our time and lying in wait for them to introduce modifications to render their offerings less attractive detracts from our own responsibility. Two vital weapons make up our arsenal against becoming slaves to our phones: freedom of choice and the ability to change. These two weapons, or "defense tactics," form the cornerstones of this book.

## Can We Really Become Addicted to Our Phones?

The first step in tackling any issue is admitting it is an issue. This is a huge step because it involves humility and taking responsibility. Congratulations, because you've taken that first step. Even if you haven't purchased this book yourself, you've shown enough curiosity to read it to this point. You've also recognized that you need some help in making

changes. Whether or not you find this book useful, possessing those two qualities alone is empowering.

The word “addiction” is so commonly used these days that it’s lost some of its gravity. *Psychology Today* defines addiction as “engaging in the use of a substance or in a behavior for which rewarding effects provide incentive to repeatedly pursue the behavior despite detrimental consequences.” Of course, there is some ambiguity here. What one person deems “detrimental” may differ from what another does; in other words, “to each their own poison.” Most articles focusing on the perils of high smartphone usage inevitably label it “addiction,” and any methods of coping or managing it are tagged as “detox.” This mirrors society’s polarized, all-or-nothing mentality. However, no matter how much we read or hear regarding what it’s doing to our brains, bodies, relationships, work, play, communities, kids, and environment, it’s only when we see the impact a high level of smartphone dependency has on our own lives at a personal level that we feel compelled to do something.

It’s worth noting, however, that whether heavy, even obsessive, use of smartphones can be properly classified as an addiction is still up for debate. As a relatively new type of behavior, smartphone use is not easily categorized by the standard classifications of impulse disorders provided by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*. The manual draws a clear line between behavioral addictions and substance addictions. While video games, exercise, food, shopping, work, and the internet in general (and online sex and gambling in particular) have all shown propensity for addictive behavior, only online gambling has been classified as an addiction according to the *DSM-5*.

I will, however, refer to “phone addiction” to describe a heavy level of phone dependency throughout this book, but bear in mind that some would categorize it as an impulse control disorder rather than an addictive disorder. Although the jury is still out, my feeling is you’re reading this book because you feel your phone cannibalizes some of the time you’d like to spend on other activities, that it’s impacting your emotional well-being and/or your relationships and those are certainly some of the hallmarks of an addiction.

## A Bit about Me

I’m a natural fidgeter. I was, and remain, easily distracted. I went to school in pre-internet times and managed to find plenty of distractions without the assistance of a smartphone.

In the evenings, I'd spend hours on the phone with my friends (after spending seven hours with them already) until my parents shouted for me to get off it.

I'm writing this book as someone who feels the lure of distraction, who loves nothing better than veering off course. But I also bring my experience as a psychotherapist, couples counselor, and life coach, who witnesses again and again how phones impact my clients' lives in unhealthy ways. Mothers who admit to feeling guilty about being distracted on their phones when their kids want to play with them, couples who admit that sex (and in some cases, sleep) has taken second place since devices entered the bedroom, employees who struggle to stop responding to emails in the middle of the night because their bosses have grown so used to their responsiveness that they fear what might happen if they stopped. It's a huge issue.

Before embarking upon writing this book I wouldn't have said I was a phone addict, but I definitely used my phone too much. It was the first thing I reached for in the morning and the last at night, and I checked it incessantly during the day. It started to bother me, so I began to schedule "phone-free zones" for myself during the day. I also had my first insight into what liberation from my phone felt like during a five-day trek in the Colombian rainforest last year, which was literally off grid. Despite this trek being extremely physically strenuous (with 5 a.m. starts and 10-hour treks every day), I felt extremely rejuvenated at the end. Although my body was challenged, my brain had a total break. There were no Trump or Brexit updates, no client queries, no friend or family dilemmas to deal with.

The week before I finally put pen to paper on this book, the topic of phone addiction came up in a religious sermon, a panel discussion on the future of beauty, and several client sessions (in one, it was named as the final trigger to break up a two-year relationship)—and that was just IRL! Online, I came across at least a dozen articles and tweets on the topic. It's definitely in the zeitgeist.

A Zen quote I often share with my clients springs to mind: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's there are few." I'm still learning and observing more about my digital behavior. My clients, in particular, have taught me much from their stories of the impact that their devices have on their well-being, their relationships, and their work.

Today, I am more conscious of how I use my phone and more curious about what possibilities open up when I use my phone less.

## Mission of This Book

At a recent talk on smartphone addiction, the speaker concluded by saying, “Your time is precious. Don’t spend it on mindless browsing.” It was a stark wake-up call, one that left many of us reflecting on how much time we frittered away online on a daily basis. If there’s one thing I’d like to impart to you, dear reader, it is to realize that YOUR time is precious. You have but one life.

How often do we lose track of where the last 10, 30, or 60 minutes have gone? Often, they’ve ebbed away through scrambles down the rabbit holes of Google or Instagram as we leapfrog from one hyperlink or one follower to the next, debating whether to like or love a former school friend’s baby. Meanwhile, the dog gets fatter, we stay in jobs we dislike for months, maybe years longer than we intend to, and our paintbrushes get drier. Many, many things get sidelined to the “I’d do X if only I had more time” category while seconds and minutes go astray as we scroll, click, and swipe.

It can sometimes feel that life is literally at our fingertips, lived through the medium of our phones. My wish is that as you reclaim your fingertips from your phone, it will allow more space for those activities that you wish you could do “if only you had more time.”

I’ve written this book as if you were a client who came to me looking to address your phone dependency. I treat any presenting issue with curiosity, as usually, the “one thing” that the client first presents is but the symptom of their real issue. And so it is with phone dependency. For most users it’s simply a Band-Aid, a coping mechanism to avoid dealing with something deeper. My goal in writing this book is to get underneath the skin of your phone use, to see what’s really driving you to spend so much of your precious, limited time on your phone. My hope is that as you get to know yourself better, you can identify the triggers that lead you to spending too much time on your phone, ultimately helping you to develop a healthier relationship with your device.

## How to Use This Book

There are seven working chapters in this book. Each chapter shares some of my thinking and experience on different aspects of phone use. Not all of them are negative, by the way.



Chapter 1, for example, looks at ways our phones, when used mindfully, can improve not just our own lives but society at large as well.

At the end of each chapter are exercises based on what that chapter has addressed. I've used all the exercises I suggest in this book myself or have worked with clients who have tried them. So, they're tried and tested as helpful in the quest to curb smartphone dependency.

The Phone Usage Pattern (PUP) chart is a log included at the end of the following seven chapters for you to monitor how your usage pattern changes. Seven weeks is roughly the halfway point between two conflicting estimates of the length of time needed to change a habit—21 or 66 days<sup>1</sup>—depending on who or what theory you're referring to. Either way, I believe it to be a sufficient time to try out different things and start to have a good feel for what works for you. If you find it's taking you longer to attain your goal, that's okay! I have included some spare PUP charts in the Appendix section at the end of the book for you to log your progress past the seven-week point, should you wish to.

I recommend reading a chapter per week, letting the stories and ideas percolate, and allocating at least an hour for the exercises, some of which will require quiet time and reflection. It also reads best chronologically as the later chapters build on what's come before.

## Start Tracking Actual Usage

If you have an iPhone or iPad, Apple's new operating system incorporates usage tracking features "to help customers understand and take control of the time they spend interacting with their iOS devices." This functionality can be found in the settings folder as "Screen Time" and needs to be switched on as the default setting is off. Essentially there are three categories—entertainment, productivity, and social networking. Screen Time gives quite detailed information not only on usage and time spent on each of the categories above (along with breakdown of app usage within those three categories) but also what notifications you're most likely to pick up for (which I think is a really interesting insight). If you use several Apple devices it allows you to set limits across all your devices, not only your phone, which some might find a useful function.

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<sup>1</sup> Gretchen Rubin, "Stop Expecting to Change Your Habit in 21 Days," *Psychology Today*, October 21, 2009, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-happiness-project/200910/stop-expecting-change-your-habit-in-21-days>.

Google announced a beta version of Digital Wellbeing app in 2018, which looks like it offers a similar type of functionality as Screen Time. But at the time of writing, I couldn't see this on offer in the Google store for Android phone users. Google does, however, offer this app as a native one—like Screen Time—on Google phones, such as Pixel.

If you have a non-Google Android device, I urge you to download a phone usage monitoring app. Some will likely be outdated by the time you read this book. But currently, I'm finding Social Fever pretty useful and easy to use. It has a strong emphasis on what you'd rather be doing offline, which for me is the whole point! Other monitoring apps include Forest, MyAddictometer, and QualityTime, to name a few. I'd encourage you to experiment with a few, see what works best for you, and then stick with it.

## CHAPTER 1

# Mobile for Good: Positive Ways That Smartphone Technology Has Changed the World

*“Whether technology’s effect is good or bad depends on the user. It’s important that we shouldn’t be slaves to technology; it should help us.”*

—14th Dalai Lama

In the interest of full disclosure, I should state that before training as a psychotherapist, I worked in the telecom industry. Initially, I held a communications role for Orange, a mobile network operator, and then for the GSMA, a trade body that represents the interests of mobile operators worldwide. It’s in my blood—my grandfather, Paddy Burke, worked on radio transmissions for the first transatlantic cable between Europe and the US, which laid the foundations for high-speed internet communications.

The telecommunications roles I performed were considerably more prosaic. In 2008, when I started working for Orange, the iPhone was shiny and new and the future looked very bright for the mobile telecom industry. Some of the projects I worked on still inspire

me. One example is Orange's birth registration campaign. In Western and Sub-Saharan Africa, birth registration stands at less than half of all children born. To access education or health care services in these countries you need to have a birth certificate, but due to lack of the necessary paperwork many are denied these basic services. The journey to register a birth—up to two days' travel—is just not feasible for a lot of people due to cost or an inability to take time off from work or childcare. Orange worked with Uganda Telecom to design a basic mobile app that could be used by local village chiefs to record births in their communities. It was an overwhelming success. In Uganda, birth registrations in the pilot area stood at 12 percent before launch of the app, but following its uptake, 80 percent of births were being registered.

In Mozambique, mobile is being used in the fight against HIV and AIDS. British nonprofit organization Absolute Return for Kids (ARK) incorporated mobile messaging to remind patients enrolled in antiretroviral therapy about appointment dates and to take their medication. Mobile reminders made a significant impact on compliance rates: 96 percent of users were still on track with their therapy after six months and 85 percent after 12 months, compared to a national average of 72 percent.

It's clear that smartphone technology is not all bad, far from it! It's important to recognize how phones can be used "smartly." Harnessed properly, our phones can be agents of social change, spreading awareness for important causes that otherwise may not gain traction and helping to bring together people who are geographically or socially separated. Our devices are not to blame for all society's ills. We do have a choice in how we use them. In this chapter, my aim is to bring some balance to the phone debate and shed light on how some people are harnessing mobile technology's capabilities to bring about positive change in their own and others' lives.

## Innovation

Many developing countries have leapfrogged landline installation completely, adopting mobile on a broad scale due to the relatively low associated infrastructure costs. Nearly two-thirds of American households have landlines, while only 2 percent of African households do. This has fueled innovation and entrepreneurship in developing countries, with many third-world countries outstripping what we've achieved in the West.

Take Kenya's M-Pesa service, for instance, which lets users transfer money via text message. M-Pesa launched in Kenya in 2007, with similar systems launched by other telecom operators in Sub-Saharan Africa soon after. According to the Pew Research Center,<sup>2</sup> in 2014, 61 percent of Kenyans with cell phones reported making or receiving payments on their cell phones in the previous year, as did 42 percent of Ugandans and 39 percent of Tanzanians. Similar figures on mobile payments weren't available for the US that year, but according to Pew Research Center,<sup>3</sup> only 35 percent of US cell phone users were doing any form of mobile banking at that point. The World Bank estimates that the number of unbanked people dropped by 20 percent between 2011 and 2014,<sup>4</sup> which is largely attributed to mobile banking. The implications of this are massive. When people have access to basic banking services, it enables them to take micro loans, save, get financing, and invest for their future.

## Raising Consciousness

Social media via mobile offers the potential for not-for-profit campaigns to reach a previously unimaginable global audience. One great example of this is the #Take3fortheSea campaign, encouraging people to take three pieces of litter away with them every time they visit the beach. How long would something like that have taken to gain traction offline? It's hard to imagine another way such a simple, important message would have been disseminated so consistently on a global basis.

Reflecting on my own personal mobile use, I remembered one occasion (before I started writing this book) waiting in line at the bank, when I was killing time by scrolling idly through my Facebook feed. Up popped a post by a charity I follow, with an urgent appeal to raise money for a particular initiative they needed support with. I had time to read it, and I felt moved. I clicked through and donated a small sum of money. The charity exceeded its target in a very short space of time that day, and I wondered how many others had made their donation in a similar way via their phones that day.

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob Poushter, "Which Developing Nation Leads on Mobile Payments? Kenya," *Pew Research Center*, February 18, 2014, <http://pewrsr.ch/1gdOIE5>.

<sup>3</sup> Poushter, "Which Developing Nation Leads on Mobile Payments? Kenya."

<sup>4</sup> The World Bank, "Massive Drop in Number of Unbanked, says New Report," April 15, 2015, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/04/15/massive-drop-in-number-of-unbanked-says-new-report>.

## Reaching Out for Support

My work as a psychotherapist is changing too with the advent of smartphone ubiquity. I sometimes conduct sessions via Skype, FaceTime, or WhatsApp video calls with clients who are working overseas. While holding a session through the medium of a mobile or tablet screen is definitely not the same as being in the same room together, it helps maintain the momentum of the work.

There are certainly clear benefits to online access to basic counseling services. I used to volunteer as a befriender for Samaritans, a UK- and Ireland-based charity providing emotional support to people who are in distress or at risk of suicide. Around 15 years ago, the organization started offering text-based befriending. There was huge resistance to it internally as many were cynical about what sort of “befriending” could be done within an SMS message of a 160-character maximum length. However, this basic service lowered the entry bar for many who wouldn’t have considered reaching out for help otherwise, particularly those under 18. Thus, Samaritans managed to reach another target group of vulnerable young adults. In some cases, it was literally a lifesaver.

Online therapy appears to be growing in popularity, particularly in the US and the UK. In the UK, the doctor app Babylon offers therapy to 150,000 active users, while PlusGuidance, an online counseling service, has 10,000 users. Talkspace, a US-based online therapy platform, reports it has 500,000 registered users worldwide, with most in the US.

## Bringing People Closer

The detrimental impact of mobile phones on relationships is well documented, and indeed it’s something that rears its head frequently in my work with couples, which I’ll address further in Chapter 3. However, there are instances where mobile telecommunications have served to provide a vital point of contact between families, friends, and partners who are separated geographically.

A particularly poignant case in point relates to a friend of mine. She and her partner met and dated in Singapore for a year before she moved back to London for work. Over the next two-and-a-half years they maintained their relationship long distance, only meeting every three to six months but seeing and speaking to each other every day via Skype. They even

managed to have movie dates together using a mobile app called Let's Gaze. This wasn't a virtual relationship. It was a relationship that had been developed in real life and clearly had a strong foundation with both of them sufficiently invested in it for it to endure several years living apart on different continents. However, I wonder whether without advanced mobile technology it could have endured so successfully?

## Net Neutrality

It's worth remembering that in and of themselves, our phones are neutral tools. It's what we do with them, what we download on them, and what we search for through them that has the capacity to help or hinder. As the Dalai Lama said, "Whether technology's effect is good or bad depends on the user."

A few years back, the supermodel Natalia Vodianova became frustrated with the futility and emptiness of the culture of "liking" on social media. However, she also took stock of her own power to garner these very likes. Rather than get stuck in a place of bemoaning how vacuous social media is or how fickle people can be, Vodianova decided to harness her influencer power for good.

In 2015, Vodianova, together with business partner and cocreator Timon Afinsky, launched Elbi, an app that simplifies charitable donations for smartphone users. Elbi focuses on giving a platform to smaller charities that users might not have heard of before.

As Vodianova commented upon Elbi's launch: "On social media, it has been ingrained within us to 'like' posts, as shared by our network, as a form of acknowledgment, acceptance, and resonance. It's the same principle on Elbi. We encourage users to 'love,' which is stronger than 'like,' because with each tap of the Love Button you are easily and securely donating \$1 toward a meaningful cause."<sup>5</sup>

Is your mobile phone a help or a hindrance? The exercises that follow are designed to get you started with keeping track of how exactly you're spending your time on your device. Becoming aware of the most addictive but least beneficial apps or features is the first step toward changing your relationship with your device.

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<sup>5</sup> PR Newswire, "Elbi Turns Social Media Likes and Loves into Charitable Giving with Apple Pay," January 22, 2018, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/elbi-turns-social-media-likes-and-loves-into-charitable-giving-with-apple-pay-300585659.html>.

..... **EXERCISES** .....

**Phone Usage Patterns (PUP)**

**Week 1**

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Total estimated time							
Messaging, texting							
Calls							
Browsing							
Shopping							
Dating							
Facebook							
Instagram							
Twitter							
Porn							
Netflix, Amazon Prime, YouTube							
Gaming							
Other							



What were the feelings that came up today?

Monday:

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Tuesday:

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Wednesday:

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Thursday:

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Friday:

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Saturday:

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Sunday:

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How much time do you think you spent on your phone this week? Using the Phone Usage Patterns (PUP) chart starting on page 13, fill in your daily estimate in the box. Now do a rough breakdown of that time. Did you spend the most time on streaming videos? Texting? Dating apps? The monitoring app should help with this logging, but obviously, “web browsing” might include a lot of very different activities.

In the space provided above, note how you felt each day.

I’ll be including this PUP chart and check-in questions at the end of each chapter, including how you try to curtail your phone use, and how effective that is from 0 (totally useless, had no effect) to 10 (totally effective) in reducing your phone usage. The goal here is to ascertain what triggers your phone dependency and what helps to reduce it. For some, it

may be boredom, for others anxiety or sadness. By tracking your mood as well as your use, hopefully you can start to gain some insight into what it is you're trying to avoid or suppress by being on your phone. Also, by logging what tactics you're using to reduce your usage, you can hopefully start to notice what works for you.

Different things work for different people. I always remind my clients of this when they ask me for tips on how to deal with anxiety, sleeplessness, OCD, and the list goes on. If there was one approach that worked for everyone there'd be one diet book, one exercise book, and one stop-smoking book on the market! Try to break it down as honestly as you can, and be specific.

\* \* \*

**1. What did you try to reduce your phone use this week? Detail it here and rate its effectiveness on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 is totally useless, had no effect; 10 is totally effective).**

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**2. Write down what you'd like your phone usage to be—your final target.**

Current use: \_\_\_\_\_ hours    Target use: \_\_\_\_\_ hours

Consider your final target and imagine that's where you're now at, that you've achieved your goal. Close your eyes and really visualize yourself only using your phone that amount per day. How would you like to use the time saved? Imagine, for instance, you have an extra hour in your day. How would you like to spend it?

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### 3. Ascertain precisely what you find so addictive on your phone.

What are you mainly using your phone for (the PUP chart on page 13 should help guide you on this!)?

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Thinking about this activity, if it were a food, what would it be? Would what you're consuming on your phone be nourishing—things to inspire, learn from, create with? Or are you ingesting junk food—stuff that feels good momentarily but ultimately leaves you feeling empty and craving more?

What would your phone content be if it were a food stuff?

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### 4. Create an inspiring lock screen.

The average smartphone user now checks their device, on average, every 12 minutes of the waking day. If you're reading this book, it's highly likely you're checking your phone even more frequently than this. Use this to your advantage!

Look at your response to question 2. Find an image that represents whatever you visualized doing with your time saved. It could be an old picture of yourself doing that very thing or a picture pulled from a magazine, a word, or even a little doodle. Just find something that strongly links you to that activity. It might be walking your dog more, having more face-to-face chats with your friends, or even sleeping!

My chosen word/image is: \_\_\_\_\_

Make it your phone lock screen. Every time you look at your phone, it'll be a reminder of what you really want to be doing with your time. I have a picture of my dog because a priority for me is spending more time with him when I'm not at work or writing my book. Visual cues are extremely powerful, especially when we're exposed to them over and over again. Imagine how much an advertiser would pay to have their products/services promoted on our home screen to us with such regularity!

## **5. Spring clean your phone.**

Declutter your phone, getting rid of the apps that you no longer use or no longer serve you. Consider it as you would a packed closet—if it's overloaded with stuff, with many things hanging from the same hanger, it's impossible to see what you have, what you like, and what you no longer wear. I operate a one in, one out policy when I buy clothes, and I've found this also works well for apps. For most of us, our phone reflects ourselves; it's our mental real estate. Be particularly wary of mind-numbing apps such as Candy Crush, 2048, and card game apps. Gaming can be addictive and time consuming. Take some time to spring clean the following from your phone:

- Shopping apps:** Reduce impulse shopping and reclaim time! Online shopping is easy to delete, and you can always do this from a computer if you really need something.
- Food delivery (Uber Eats, Grubhub, Caviar, Seamless, Deliveroo):** Do you need to have this on your phone? Or could you just have this on your computer?
- Social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram):** Consider deleting just one to start! Look at your usage as tracked in the Phone Usage Patterns chart. What can you do without?

List the mind-numbing apps that you use to kill time:

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