

Fade to grey

Could the simple act of switching your phone display to black and white be the key to reducing the draw of endless scrolling?

With brightly coloured apps, high-resolution displays and notifications that light up the screen, smartphones are deliberately designed to be as eye-catching as possible. They're engineered to arrest and keep your attention, and their aesthetic is a huge part of the appeal. But with adults in the UK now spending an average of three hours and 21 minutes every day glued to their phone screens, and Americans even longer at around four hours 30 minutes, people are increasingly investigating ways to reduce their draw. There's even a growing market for devices and apps to monitor screen time and block access to certain functions, such as social media – literally using more technology to try to tackle the addiction to technology. But there is a simpler, lower tech intervention. By switching the display to greyscale, meaning everything appears in black, white and grey, you can immediately diminish the device's appeal. Could flipping a simple switch reshape the way you interact with your phone, and help you reclaim your time and attention?

Engineered to be seen

The human brain is wired to notice colour. Think about how you feel walking through a flower garden at the height of summer, or a brightly lit fairground as night falls. Colour demands your attention, to the point where you can even end up feeling overstimulated by certain environments. Mobile phones offer a world of colour in the palm of your hand, with notifications that pop with visual urgency, an endless reel of high-definition videos and photos on social media, gaming apps that seem almost three-dimensional and the promise

that whenever you unlock your screen there will always be something new to see.

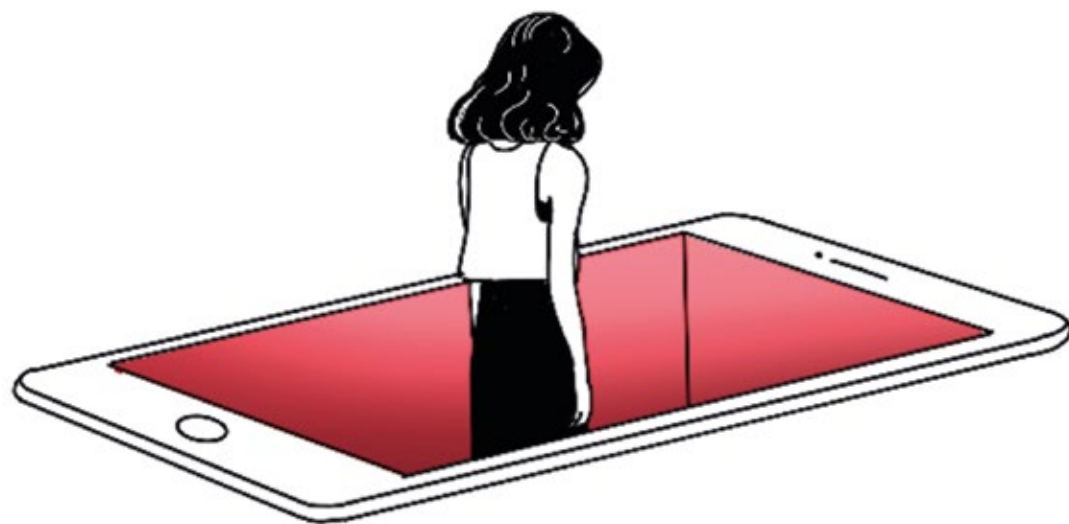
Dr Richard Graham is a consultant psychiatrist and member of the clinical board at The Soke Private Mental Health Care Centre in London. He has a particular interest in the impact of technology on mental health, and describes phones as having 'a persuasive design' with 'a range of elements designed into them to keep your attention'. He says: 'The colours are vivid and hyper-real. This seductive, rich colourfulness is tapping into something in our biology in the same way the colours in nature do – such as the red of danger.' He points out that holding people's attention in this way has huge commercial value for the companies behind the technology.

Stolen time

The problem with this vibrant, ultra-appealing technology is that it can be difficult to turn away from, and many people will be familiar with the feeling of picking up their phone with the intention of taking a quick glance at something, then falling into a scrolling session that leaves them wondering where time has gone – almost as though their judgment has been bypassed.

Earlier this year, researchers from the University of Sussex found that scrolling social media has become the most frequent leisure activity in the UK, ranking above hobbies such as listening to music, reading and crafts. Yet even though lots of people are doing it, the study also found that it was rated as the least enjoyable pastime. The next time you are in a public space such as a train station, airport or even queuing





to be served at the supermarket, take note of how many people around you are numbly staring at their phones. Do they look like they're having fun?

'The idea that you can be endlessly exposed to something hyper-stimulating is questionable,' says Dr Graham. He gives the example of the current fashion for short, fast-paced video clips with 'choppy editing' that are intended to keep you scrolling for more. 'It's designed to be addictive to keep you on-screen, but this hyperstimulation can lead to you feeling exhausted, depleted and emotionally blunted,' he says.

Around the world, governments are starting to recognise the potential pitfalls of the digital age, with moves to regulate social media use for young people, as well as ways of safeguarding data privacy and reducing misinformation. There is also research to suggest that constantly looking at screens prevents people from forming mental pictures or imagining things in the 'mind's eye' in the same way you would if you were listening to a podcast or reading a book.

Recognising the problem

If you feel your relationship to your phone is becoming dysfunctional, try asking the simple question: 'Is this device serving me – or am I serving the device?' Technology is becoming so addictive that some people find it hard to put their phones down, always alert for notifications or keen to respond immediately to the next message, like or share. Dr Graham points out that this dependence is even reflected in language. 'When the phone battery goes flat, we say that it's died,' he says.

He uses the analogy of diet as a way to consider the quality of your screen time. Is your intake nutritious and well-made? Or is it junk that will only leave you feeling satisfied in the short term? 'Some people are hovering in a twilight zone of being neither engaged nor disengaged, clicking listlessly on things,' he says. 'They're doing it out of habit rather than

experiencing any real pleasure.' Phones can also be a way of self-soothing, or trying to make human connections – although again it's worth analysing whether the outcomes you are experiencing are positive.

Flipping the switch

Reducing your phone's appeal by switching to greyscale is simple on most devices – there's usually an option in settings. With the flick of a switch, your screen becomes functional and flat, rather than vivid and enticing, apps appear dulled and less distinguishable and tailored adverts less urgent. Even social media can feel less interesting if you can no longer see the colour of the influencer's new lipstick or the blue of the sea on the luxury cruise. Importantly, the function of your phone doesn't change when you turn off the colour. You can still make calls, answer messages, access banking apps and emails, make purchases and interact with your online communities. Nothing is blocked or forbidden. But your decision to use your phone may become more conscious.

And, of course, it's easy to switch between the two. Some people love the freeing nature of greyscale so much that they opt to keep their devices permanently black and white, while others prefer to turn it on and off – perhaps operating in colour to look through a batch of photos or video-call a friend, then flipping back to greyscale to reduce the appeal of picking up their phone during work or family time.

'Your phone is an object and a tool,' says Dr Graham. 'Think about how you can use it to do the things you want it to do – rather than being passive and letting the device nudge your attention this way and that.'

Words: Jade Beecroft

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JADE'S FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE

Is your phone broken? That's the question I'm most often asked when friends or family glance at my screen. The answer is no – my iPhone is perfectly functional. I just choose to view it in black, white and grey most of the time.

I decided to try switching to greyscale after hearing it recommended on a podcast as a way of reducing a phone's appeal. Like many people, my relationship with my phone can be occasionally dysfunctional. I try to practise 'good phone hygiene' by keeping it away from the table at mealtimes, at the bottom of my bag while out on nature walks and away from my bedside at night.

But inevitably – thanks to the ingenuity of the engineers in Silicon Valley – I do still feel it tugging at my attention, compelling me to pick up and scroll, looking for that next dopamine hit. Like many people, I'm guilty of staying up past bedtime on social media, promising myself 'just one more video'. Or making ill-advised late-night purchases thanks to targeted advertising catching me at the time of day when my resistance is at its lowest.

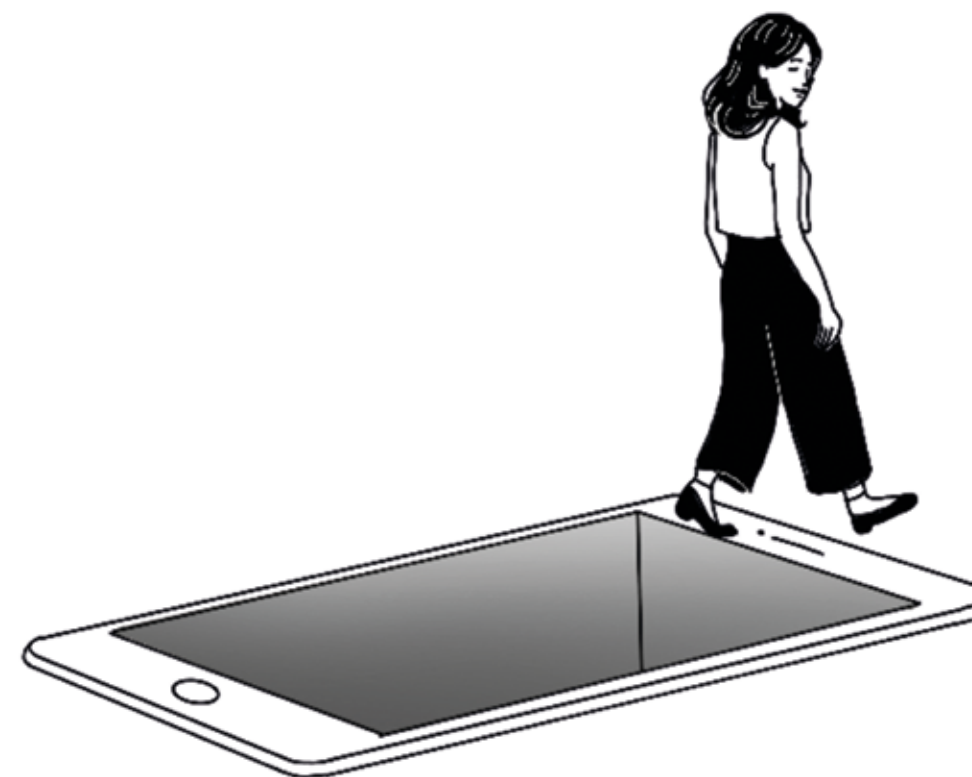
The greyscale experiment has been extremely interesting. It was easy enough to do – I simply went into my phone settings: accessibility, display, then colour filters. With the swipe of a switch, my phone held less appeal. The screen was less enticing, the apps less distinguishable, and videos were just... well... a bit dull. I've found myself reaching for my phone in those moments

of boredom, when the modern habit is to seek distraction, unlocking the screen to be greeted by grey, and setting it aside again. Most of the time, that feels good. I can avoid that heavy-minded, slightly foggy, numbed feeling I was experiencing after too much scrolling. It's a relief.

And on the occasions where I really do need to see the colour, such as if a friend sends me a video or I want to take some photos, I just nip into my settings and switch it back on again. Interestingly, there have been times when I've accidentally left the colour switched on, then later caught myself scrolling and realised my error.

Our relationship with our device is pervasive and requires constant assessment and vigilance. After a few months of dabbling with greyscale, I've settled into the habit of keeping my phone in black and white for about 90 per cent of the time. If I want to view photos or watch a video, it prompts me to move to my tablet or computer screen, which is probably better for my attention span – and my eyesight – anyway. The most common reason I flick back temporarily now to colour is when I'm opening the maps app to look for the red lines indicating traffic on the motorway.

When it comes to balance, greyscale is more of a gentle ally than a silver bullet. But I feel better about my phone use in black and white.



ILLUSTRATIONS: ALEXSANDRA WICHOWSKA