

Look up

A short book about looking at your phone while someone
is talking to you

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First edition

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contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book about one small movement. Someone you love is talking to you, and your eyes go down to a screen, and come back up, and go down again. It takes a second each time. You'd say you were listening, and in a sense you were, because you can repeat the last thing they said. And yet the person talking saw your face change, and adjusted what they were saying, and the evening went slightly differently because of it, and neither of you could say exactly how.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the glance makes sense from the inside. The phone is quick, it might be important, you can hear perfectly well with your eyes down, and everyone at the table is doing it. The second is that the glance isn't what it feels like from the inside, and there's research on why. People who use their phones during time with their partners, friends and children feel more distracted and get less connection and meaning from the time. A person being talked to while the other looks at a phone, even part of the time, rates the conversation and the relationship lower and feels less that they belong. Children whose parent is on a phone escalate their attempts to get attention and then give up. A two-year-old being taught a word by a parent who takes one call doesn't learn the word. And the second you think you spent on the screen isn't what the other person timed. The third is practical. When someone is talking to you, the phone goes out of your hands and out of your sight, and if you genuinely need it, you say so before you look. That's all of it, and chapters 17 to 20 cover how.

This book doesn't say phones are bad or that you should use yours less in general. An earlier book in this series, *The phone can wait*, is about the phone in every spare moment. This one is only about the moments when a person is talking to you.

Two cautions.

If checking your phone feels less like a habit and more like something you can't stop, if you feel anxious when it's out of reach or you check it in a loop that doesn't end, the habit in this book is the smaller part of what's going on. Chapter 21 says where to go.

And if the person who won't look up is your partner and not you, most of this book still applies, but chapter 21 is the part written for you.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

The lit face across the table

Your partner is telling you about a meeting. It's a story with a build-up. Somebody said something, and somebody else reacted, and the point is coming. Your phone is on the table beside your plate and it lights up, and your eyes go to it, and the notification is nothing, a delivery update, and your eyes come back. Your partner has paused. You say "go on", and they go on, but shorter, and the point when it comes is delivered flat, and you say "that's mad", and they say "yeah", and the story is over.

Or you're at the park, on the bench, and your daughter is on the climbing frame. "Watch this." You look up. She does the thing. "Did you see?" You saw the end of it. "Watch this." This time you're mid-message, and you say "I'm watching" without looking, and she does the thing, and she doesn't ask if you saw. Or a friend you haven't seen for months is across a cafe table telling you their marriage is in trouble, and your phone buzzes on the wood, and you turn it over without reading it, and they saw you turn it over, and they say "anyway", and change the subject.

These are invented, but I'd guess yours are close. Some words for the rest of the book. **The glance** is the look down at the screen while someone is talking to you. **The half-listen** is what you're doing while your eyes are on the phone, hearing the words with the rest of you elsewhere. **The drop** is the moment the person talking sees your face change and loses you, which chapter 4 is about, and which they feel before you've registered looking down. **The tug** is the pull towards the phone that arrives during a story, which chapter 16 is about. **Away** is where the phone goes when

someone's talking, which is out of your hands and out of your sight, and not face down on the table. **The look up** is the small act of putting it away and giving your face back.

Before you go on, do one thing. For one evening, count. Every time someone talks to you and your eyes go to a screen, that's one. Count separately every time you say "sorry, what?" or "say that again", and every time someone says your name twice. Don't change anything yet. Just get the numbers, and notice which of the three is the biggest surprise.

Why the glance seems harmless

Nobody looks down at a phone while their child is talking because they've decided the child doesn't matter. The glance has reasons, and they're good ones, and the book won't work if we pretend they aren't.

The first is that it's quick. A glance takes a second. It doesn't feel like leaving the conversation. It feels like checking a clock.

The second is that it might be important. Someone could be trying to reach you. The school, a parent, work. The phone is how the important things arrive, and a look at it is a look at whether the world needs you.

The third is that you can hear perfectly well with your eyes down. You can prove it. Ask anyone in the middle of a glance what was just said and they can tell you. So the listening is happening. The eyes are just doing something else.

The fourth is that everyone does it. The person telling you the story has done the same to you this week. There's a shared understanding at the table that phones are present and get looked at, and nobody has ever called it out.

The fifth is that the story is long, or ordinary, or one you've heard before. The day at work. The thing the teacher said. You can give it half of you and it will get everything it needs.

The sixth is that this is your time. You've worked all day and the phone is the small thing that's yours, and the moment someone starts talking is often the first moment you've had it in your hand.

Each of these is true in a way. The glance is quick. The phone is where important things arrive. You do hear the words. Other people do it. Some stories are long. You do need something that's yours. The next ten chapters take these one at a time, and the aim in each isn't to tell you the reason is wrong, but to show what the glance is doing that the reason doesn't see. If the phone is in your hand in every spare moment and not only during conversations, that's the earlier book, *The phone can wait*. This one starts at the moment somebody speaks.

"I can listen and look at the same time"

This is the belief that holds up the others, so it goes first. You can repeat what was just said, so you were listening, so the glance cost nothing.

Repeating the last sentence is a low bar. The words go in whether or not you're attending to them, in the way you can be asked what a song on the radio was and know it. What the person talking wants isn't a record of their words. It's your attention on them, and that's the thing that goes to the screen.

The research here doesn't measure listening. It measures what people get from a conversation with a phone in play, and it's consistent. Ryan Dwyer, Kostadin Kushlev and Elizabeth Dunn had over three hundred people share a meal at a restaurant with friends or family, and assigned some to keep their phones on the table and some to put them away. The people with phones out felt more distracted, and the distraction reduced how much they enjoyed the time. In a second study, people reporting on their days in real time felt more distracted and enjoyed in-person interactions less when they'd used their phone during them.

Kushlev and Dunn then took parents to a science museum with their children and assigned them to use their phones a lot or a little during the visit. The parents told to use their phones more felt more distracted, and through that felt less connected to their children and got less meaning from the time. A week-long diary

study found the same shape. Nobody in these studies was told to stop listening. They were told to use the phone, and the distraction came with it.

Adrian Ward and colleagues found something stranger. In two experiments, the mere presence of a person's own phone, not in use, reduced how much attention they had available for a task, and the effect was largest for people who relied on their phones most. If the phone can do that switched off on the desk, it's hard to argue that it does nothing lit up in your hand.

So the half-listen is real, and it's a half. My interpretation is that you keep the words and lose the person, and the person can tell which half they got.

"It was only a second"

The glance is quick. You'd swear it was a second. Possibly it was.

The trouble is who's timing it. You're timing from the moment you decided to look to the moment you looked back, and that's short. The person talking is timing something different. They're timing from the moment your face changed to the moment it came back, and that's the drop, and it starts before your glance does.

Faces change before eyes move. The tug arrives, and something goes out of your expression, and the person watching you sees it go. Then your eyes go down. Then, on the way back, there's a moment where your eyes are on them but you're still finishing the thought from the screen. They see that too. My reading of what's going on is that the drop runs from the first flicker to the full return, and the glance is the middle third of it.

Varoth Chotpitayasunondh and Karen Douglas tested how much of a conversation partner's phone use it takes to make a difference. They had people watch a short animation in which they imagined themselves in a two-person conversation, and the partner either looked at their phone a lot, some of the time, or not at all. More phone use made the conversation feel worse and the relationship feel worse, and the effect ran through feeling less that they belonged and through worse mood. The partial condition wasn't safe. It was the middle of a slope.

This was an animation, not a dinner, and people imagining a conversation may react differently from people having one. But it points the same way as the restaurant and the museum, and it says something the restaurant couldn't. What matters isn't the total time on the phone. It's the amount of looking away the other person sees, and they see all of it.

So when you say it was only a second, you're right about the part you measured. The person across from you measured the whole thing, and the whole thing is what they'll remember about the evening, if they remember anything.

"They didn't notice"

You looked down, they carried on talking, nothing was said. So they didn't notice, or didn't mind.

They noticed. People who are talking to you watch your face, because that's what talking to someone is. It isn't a broadcast. It's a thing done to a face that answers back, and every sentence is shaped by what the face is doing. When the face goes to a screen, the sentence changes, and the person changes it without deciding to.

Children make the noticing visible, because they haven't yet learned to hide it. Jenny Radesky and colleagues watched fifty-five caregivers eating with young children in fast food restaurants and wrote down everything that happened. Forty of them used a phone during the meal. What the observers saw most clearly was absorption, the degree to which the adult's attention was in the device rather than with the child. And the children responded to the absorption along a range. Some entertained themselves. Others escalated, louder, more insistent, climbing, until they got a look. The most absorbed adults, when the child's behaviour finally reached them, often responded harshly.

That's what noticing looks like at four. At fourteen it looks like one-word answers. At forty it looks like "anyway", and a change of subject, and a story that gets told to somebody else. The signal gets quieter as people get older, and it's easy to mistake quiet for not minding.

Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas's finding fits here too. The path from the partner's phone use to the worse conversation ran through feeling less that you belong. Belonging isn't a thing people announce the loss of. It's a thing they go quiet about.

My interpretation is that nobody says anything because saying "you're on your phone" feels petty, and feeling petty is worse than feeling ignored. So they don't say it. They just tell you a little less next time.

"It might be important"

It might. The phone is where the school rings and where the hospital texts. A look at it is a look at whether you're needed.

But think about what actually arrives. In a day, the phone offers you a delivery, a group chat, a headline, three emails you didn't want, a like, an update from an app you forgot you had, and, once in a long while, something that can't wait. The glance during a story isn't a check for the thing that can't wait. It's a check of everything, in the hope that one of them is interesting, and the thing that can't wait is almost never what's there.

There's a simpler test. The things that genuinely can't wait ten minutes announce themselves. They ring, and keep ringing, or they come from a number that only calls when it matters.

Everything else can wait ten minutes, which is about how long it takes for the person talking to you to finish. If you're waiting on a specific call, a hospital, a builder, a child's lift home, say so at the start. Then the look at the phone when it rings is an announced exception and not a glance.

What one interruption does is worth knowing. Jessa Reed, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff had thirty-eight mothers each teach their two-year-old two new words, one at a time. During one of the two teaching periods, the mother's phone rang and she took the call. The children learned the word from the uninterrupted teaching. They didn't learn the word from the

interrupted one, even though the mothers said the word just as many times in each. The number of words didn't change. The thread did.

It's a small study of one narrow thing, and I wouldn't build much on it alone. But it makes a point that's easy to miss. A break in a conversation isn't a pause after which everything resumes. It's a cut, and the thing being built on the other side of it doesn't always survive.

So the important message is real, and it's rare, and the glance is the habit of checking for it ninety-nine times when it isn't there. The one time it is, it will ring.

"They're only telling me about their day"

The story is ordinary. A meeting, a queue, a thing the teacher said, what happened on the bus. Nothing in it requires your full attention, and you'd give your full attention if something did.

Andrew Przybylski and Netta Weinstein ran two experiments on what a phone in view does to a conversation between two people, and found it hurt closeness and connection and conversation quality, most clearly when the topic was personally meaningful. Shalini Misra and colleagues had a hundred pairs talk for ten minutes about either a casual or a meaningful topic while an observer noted whether either person had a phone on the table or in their hand. Conversations with no phone in sight were rated better, and the people in them reported more concern for each other. I should say plainly that the mere presence part of this is disputed. John Crowley and colleagues tried to repeat Przybylski and Weinstein's study and found no effect of a phone in view, and they thought changing norms might be why. This book isn't about phones in view. It's about phones in use, where the findings in chapter 3 are on firmer ground. But I mention the meaningful-topic result because of what it implies. The effect is biggest where the stakes are highest, and the ordinary story is where the stakes hide.

Here's why. The account of the day isn't information. It's how people stay known to each other. The meeting story is a way of saying "this is what I'm dealing with", and "the teacher said" is a child's way of saying "this is what my world is like". The point of the ordinary story isn't the point of the story. It's that someone wanted to tell it to you, and the telling is where the closeness is made and

kept. Nobody opens with the thing that matters. They open with the queue, and watch what your face does, and decide from that whether to go on.

So the ordinary story is the audition for the meaningful one. Glance during it, and the meaningful one doesn't get told. If your version of this problem is that you're listening with your eyes up but composing your own answer while they talk, that's an earlier book, *You were waiting to talk*. The version here is simpler and more visible. The eyes went down.

"I'm still here, I'm just on my phone"

You're in the room. You're on the sofa next to them. Being present, you'd say, is about being there, and you're there.

There's a well-known piece of research on infants that tests this exactly. A parent plays with their baby, then, on a signal, keeps looking at the baby but goes still and unresponsive, then after a couple of minutes resumes. The parent never leaves. Babies hate it. They protest, look away, try to get the parent back, and take a while to recover when the parent does. Sarah Myruski and colleagues ran a version of this with fifty infants aged between seven months and two years, with one change. During the still phase, the mother used her phone. As in the standard version, the infants showed more negative feeling and less positive feeling while the mother was on the phone than during play, and made their most attempts to get her back during that phase. Infants whose mothers reported using their phones more often were less exploratory and less positive during the phone phase, and recovered less when their mothers came back.

The point of the original experiment was that a parent's presence isn't their body in the room. It's their responsiveness, and a face that's there but not answering is worse for a baby than an empty room might be, because it's a face that should answer and doesn't. The phone version says that's what a phone does to a face.

A baby is not your partner and this is one study. But I think the shape holds at every age. Being in the room while on the phone isn't a lesser form of presence. It's a distinct thing that the other

person experiences as being with someone who isn't there, and the fact that you could be there, that your body is right here and your face is right there and it still isn't answering, is what makes it worse than the empty room. Nobody feels ignored by a person in another city.

So "I'm still here" is true of your body. The rest of you is at a distance the other person can measure, and they measure it by your face.

"Kids need to learn I'm not always available"

This one is true, and it's worth separating from the habit it's defending.

Children do need to learn that adults have their own lives, that a parent on a work call can't be interrupted, that a closed door means wait. That's availability, and teaching it is a kindness. A child who learns that "not now, I'm busy" is a real sentence with an end to it learns that people have limits, and that limits aren't rejection.

The glance teaches something else. "Not now, I'm busy" is a clear message with a boundary. The glance is "yes, go on" with a face that says "not really". The child isn't learning that you're unavailable. They're learning that you're available in a way they can't rely on, which is harder to make sense of than a closed door, and which produces the escalation Radesky's observers saw in the restaurants. The child isn't being taught patience. They're being taught to shout.

There's also a loop here that's worth knowing about, because it can feel from the inside like the child is the cause. Brandon McDaniel and Jenny Radesky followed a hundred and eighty-three couples with a young child over six months and measured how often technology interrupted time with the child, how stressed the parents felt, and how the child was behaving. It ran both ways. A child's difficult behaviour predicted more parenting stress, and the stress predicted more turning to the phone during time with the child. And the phone during time with the child predicted more difficult behaviour afterwards. In a separate study of a hundred

and seventy families the same authors found that the interruptions were associated with both acting out and withdrawing in the children. They're careful to say the direction isn't settled, and so am I.

But look at the loop from the parent's side. The child is hard, so you retreat into the phone for a moment's relief, so the child gets harder, so you retreat further. Each step is reasonable. The whole thing is a trap with the phone as the door. If the child needs to learn you're not always available, tell them so, in words, with a time. The glance doesn't teach that. It teaches them to try harder, and then to stop trying.

"They do it too"

Your partner glances. Your friend checks. Your teenager barely looks up. So there's a shared norm at the table, and you're keeping to it, and it would be odd to be the only one with the phone away.

Two things about this. The first is that the norm was built by everyone doing what you're doing and nobody starting first. Each glance makes the next person's glance easier. If the person across from you is on their phone while you talk, part of the reason is that you were on yours while they did, last week, and neither of you meant it as a policy. Norms aren't agreed. They're accumulated, and they can be un-accumulated by one person in the same way.

The second is that "they do it too" is a reason to be annoyed, not a reason to do it. You already know what it's like to be talked to by a lit face, because you've been on the receiving end, and you've felt the drop from the other side. That knowledge is the strongest argument in this book, and it's one you own already. What it isn't is a licence. The fact that someone else's glance stings doesn't make yours sting less.

You'll want to say something. Don't, yet. An earlier book in this series, *The next move is yours*, is about waiting for the other person to go first, and its argument applies here in full. If you make your own phone go away when they talk, and you don't announce it or make a point of it, one of two things happens. Either they notice, in a week or a month, and something shifts, because a person who's

being fully listened to tends to look up more. Or they don't notice, and you've still had the better evening, because chapter 15 is about what the glance costs the person doing it.

If, after a few weeks of this, the thing you want is for them to look up as well, ask for it plainly and once. "When I'm telling you something, could you put the phone down? I've started doing it and it's made a difference to me." That's a request, not a score, and the earlier book *They can't read your mind* is about why the plain version works and the hint doesn't.

"It's how I switch off after work"

The phone is the small thing that's yours. You've spent the day answering to people and the twenty minutes with your feet up and the feed is where you go slack, and it happens to be the twenty minutes when the house is full of people wanting to tell you things.

The need is real. Everyone needs a stretch of the evening that's theirs, where nothing is asked. The trouble isn't the phone and it isn't the need. It's the timing. The slack twenty minutes has landed exactly on top of the twenty minutes when your partner has things to say and your children haven't seen you all day, and both are trying to happen in the same chair.

The result is that neither happens. You don't switch off, because someone's talking to you and you're half-answering. And they don't get you, because you're half in the feed. The glance is the seam where the two are stitched together badly. You get a worse rest and they get a worse you, and the phone gets the twenty minutes anyway.

The fix is to give the phone its twenty minutes on its own. Before you walk in, in the car, at the end of the platform, on the bench outside. Twenty minutes with the feed and nobody talking. Then go in, and the phone goes away, and the people get the rest of the evening. Or do it after, once the children are down, with the sofa and the partner both agreed on what's happening. What doesn't work is trying to have both at once and calling the result listening.

I'd add one thing. The feeling of "this is mine" that the phone gives is strongest when it's being taken from you, and a child saying "Dad, Dad" is the taking. Give it its own time and the child stops being the thing between you and your rest. If bringing the whole job home in your head is the larger problem, that's a later book in this series. This one is only about the phone in the chair.

"I need it for the thing we're talking about"

Sometimes the phone is part of the conversation. They mention a place and you look it up. They ask what time the train is and you check. You're showing them the photo you were talking about. That isn't a glance and this book isn't against it.

The difference is easy to feel and easy to state. When the phone is part of the conversation, the other person can see the screen, or could, and knows why you're on it. When it's a glance, the screen is yours, the reason is yours, and they're waiting. Same object, different act. In the first, the phone is on the table between you. In the second it's a door you've stepped through.

Two things go wrong at the edge. The first is the errand that turns into a glance. You go to check the train time, and there's a notification, and you're reading it, and the train time was found twenty seconds ago. The person watching sees the moment your purpose ended and the drift began, and to them it looks exactly like the glance it's become. The second is the reverse. You tell yourself you're looking something up for the conversation and you're not, and they can tell, because nothing comes back from the screen.

The habit to build is a short sentence. "Hang on, let me find it." "I'll check what time it is." Out loud, before the phone comes up, and then the phone goes away when the thing is found. Said out loud, the errand can't turn into a glance without you hearing yourself do it. And the other person is with you on the screen instead of on the far side of it.

So the phone can be in the conversation. It just can't be in it silently, and it has to leave when its job is done.

What the glance says

You don't mean anything by it. Nobody does. But the glance is received as a message whether or not one was sent, and it's worth being clear about what the message is.

The message is about rank. When somebody is talking to you and your eyes go to the screen, what your face says is that the thing on the screen, whatever it is, outranks the thing being said. Not forever. For the second. But rank isn't measured in seconds. It's measured in who gets looked at when there's a choice, and every glance is a choice, made in front of the person who lost it.

Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas found that the route from a partner's phone use to the worse conversation ran through feeling less that you belong. That's the message landing. Belonging is the sense that you're one of the people someone would turn towards. The glance is a turning away, and a hundred small turnings away add up to a claim, and the claim is "you're not quite one of those people", and it's a claim you'd never make in words.

My reading is that this is why the glance stings out of proportion to its size. It's not the second. It's the ranking, and people are very good at reading rankings from faces, because we've been doing it since long before phones. A child reads it at once. Adults read it and explain it away. Everyone reads it.

There's an earlier book in this series, *They can't read your mind*, about how the people close to you can't tell what you need unless you say it. The glance is the mirror of that. They can't read your

mind, but they can read your face, and your face is saying something you don't believe. The only way to correct the message is to stop sending it, because "I was listening, honestly" arrives after the face has already spoken.

What it does to the story

Chapter 5 said people notice. This chapter is about what they do next, because the cost of the glance isn't mostly in the conversation it lands in. It's in the ones that follow.

People adjust. When your face drops halfway through, the person talking learns something about that story, which is that it's the kind that loses you, and they learn it faster than you'd think. So the next telling is shorter. The build-up gets cut. The point arrives early and flat, so it can be got out before the drop. And then the tellings get rarer, because a story told to a face that keeps leaving isn't worth the effort of starting.

Children go through this in a compressed form. The range Radesky's observers recorded ran from the child entertaining themselves to the child escalating, and I'd interpret the two ends as stages, not types. First the child tries harder, "watch this", "Dad", louder, closer. If that doesn't work often enough, the child stops trying. "Watch this" turns into doing the thing without asking. The quiet child at the table isn't always content.

With a partner, the adjustment looks like efficiency. They tell you what you need to know and keep the rest. The meeting story becomes "work was fine". The thing that happened on the bus doesn't get mentioned. And because the ordinary story is the audition for the meaningful one, which chapter 7 argued, the meaningful one doesn't get told either. It gets told to a friend, or a sibling, or nobody.

So the price of the glance is a slow thinning of what people bring you. You won't see it happen, because what's missing is a story that never started. You'll just notice, one year, that you're not sure what your partner's week was like, and that your child answers "fine", and you'll put it down to age or work or the stage you're at, and some of it will be that. The rest is the drop, compounded.

What it costs you

Everything so far has been about the person talking. This chapter is about you, because the glance isn't a gift to yourself at their expense. It's a loss on both sides.

Start with the evening. The restaurant study found that the people with phones out enjoyed the meal with their friends less, and the route was distraction. The museum study found that parents told to use their phones more got less connection and less meaning from time with their children. In both, the phone user was the one who lost something. The other people at the table may have lost more, but the loss to the person glancing was real and measurable, and they'd chosen it.

There's a newer finding worth adding. McDaniel and colleagues measured phone use directly, through the phone itself, in two hundred and sixty-four parents of infants over eight days, and asked each day about mood. On days when a parent used their phone more around their baby, their mood was lower. Except on days when the parent felt they'd been responsive to the baby anyway. That's one study, and it's about babies and about mood on the day, and the authors are careful about what it shows. But I think it points at something you'll recognise. The glance doesn't feel good afterwards. There's a small flatness at the end of an evening spent half in the feed, and it isn't the feed's fault. It's that you spent the evening with people and didn't get them.

Then there's what you don't hear. Chapter 14 was about the stories that stop being told. Those were stories you'd have wanted. The thing the teacher said was funny. The meeting story was your partner trusting you with a bad day. The friend's marriage was the friend needing you. Each glance trades one of these for a delivery update.

And there's the version of you being built in their memory. Not by the big things. By a hundred evenings of a lit face. My interpretation is that it's the cost that's hardest to see, because the person paying it is the you of ten years from now, wondering why the conversations at the table are so short.

The tug

Before the method, it helps to know the thing you're up against, because it's smaller than it feels.

The tug is the pull towards the phone that arrives while someone's talking. Notice when it comes. It's rarely at the interesting part. It comes in a pause. At a lull in the story. When the build-up is running long. When you know where this is going. When the phone lights. When it doesn't light but you wonder. It's a feeling in the hand and the eyes, a small restlessness, and it presents itself as a good idea, "I'll just check".

What it isn't is information. The tug doesn't know there's a message. It arrives on schedule whether there's one or not, because it's a habit's cue and not a signal from the world. Ward's finding in chapter 3, that the phone occupies attention even when unused, is what the tug feels like from inside. Part of you is holding a thread to the phone, and the thread pulls.

Treat it as a sensation. Not a command and not a failure. It shows up, it lasts a minute or less, and if you don't act on it, it goes, usually before the story does. It's much easier to sit through when the phone is away, which is why chapter 17 is about where it goes. A phone in the pocket produces a tug you can ignore. A phone on the table produces a tug with a screen attached.

Two more things. The tug is strongest in the first couple of weeks of not answering it, and then it thins, in my experience of habits generally and not from any study of this one. And the tug has

nothing to do with the person talking. It arrives with your partner and your child and your closest friend alike, because it isn't about them. Knowing that takes some of the guilt out of it. Feeling the pull isn't a judgement on the story or the teller. It's just the habit, asking.

An earlier book in this series, *The feeling will pass without help*, is about urges in general. This is one of them, and the treatment is the same. Notice it, name it, let it pass, and look up.

Away

Here's the method. It has two parts, and this is the first. When someone is talking to you, the phone is away, which means out of your hands and out of your sight.

The definition matters, because the natural compromise is the phone face down on the table, and that isn't away. The restaurant study's phone-out condition was phones on the table, and that's where the distraction came from. Misra's observers counted a phone on the table as present, and the conversations with a phone on the table were rated worse. Face down, the phone still buzzes against the wood, still lights the edge, and still holds the thread that Ward's experiments found even a silent phone holds. Away means a pocket, a bag, a drawer, the hall, the kitchen counter when you're in the living room. Somewhere your hand can't go without your legs.

Where it goes depends on the conversation. At the table, the phone isn't at the table. Yours, in a bag or the hall, before the food's put down. This is the easiest one to make into a fixed rule because meals have a start. On the sofa in the evening, the phone lives somewhere that isn't the arm of the sofa. If the earlier book *The phone can wait* has already given your phone a home, it's the same place. At bedtime with a child, it doesn't come into the room. In the car with a child, it's in the glove box, which is also where a later book on driving will want it. On a walk or in a cafe with a friend, it's in the pocket or bag, and it stays there.

What about the person walking into a room where you're already on the phone? That's the second part of the method, in chapter 18. This part is for the conversations you can see coming.

You'll notice the tug more, not less, in the first days of doing this, because the phone was answering it before you'd felt it. That's fine. It's the habit becoming visible, and a visible habit is one you can not do. And you'll notice something else within a week.

Conversations get longer. Not because anyone decided to talk more. Because the drop stopped happening, and stories that were being cut short started reaching their ends.

Look up and say so

The second part is for the times the phone is already in your hand when someone starts talking, and for the times you catch yourself mid-glance.

The move is the look up. Phone down, on the table, on the arm of the chair, wherever it lands, and eyes to the face. Not "hang on". Not finishing the sentence you were reading. Down, and up. If the thing on the screen was mid-way, it'll be there in ten minutes, and it doesn't need you to say goodbye to it.

If you were caught, say so, once and briefly. "Sorry, go on." That's the whole sentence. Not "I was listening", which chapter 13 explained arrives after the face has already said otherwise, and which turns a small drop into an argument about whether it happened. Not an explanation of what was on the phone. "Sorry, go on" admits the glance, gives the turn back, and ends. An earlier book, *You've apologised enough*, is about why once is the right number.

Then there's the genuine exception, the call you're waiting for, the message that really can't wait, and the method for that is to say so before you look. "I need to check this, it's the hospital, give me a minute." Or at the start of the evening, "I'm expecting a call from the builder, so if the phone goes I'll take it." Said first, the look at the phone isn't a glance. It's an announced pause with a reason and a length, and the other person can hold the story across it, because they know what the pause is and when it ends. Said afterwards, or not at all, it's a glance with an excuse.

Naming the exception is also what keeps it an exception. If you have to say out loud "I need to check this" you'll find you can't say it for a delivery update, and the number of things that turn out to be worth saying it for is small. My guess is one or two a week. That's the real rate of the thing that can't wait, and the glance was checking for it fifty times a day.

What to do with your eyes

Once the phone is away and your face is back, there's a question people don't expect, which is what to do with it. The half-listen had a job for your eyes. Full listening has to give them one too, or the tug will offer one.

The answer is simpler than it sounds. Look at the person. Not fixedly, not in a way you'd have to think about, but as you would have before phones, which is mostly on their face with the normal drifting away and back. And let your face answer. The reason this needs saying is that a face that's been half in a screen for years has got used to being unread, and it can take a while to remember that it's the other half of the conversation.

Then have one thing ready to do at the end of a stretch of their talking. A question about the last thing they said. A reflection of it, "so he just didn't turn up". Or nothing but a nod, if the story's still going. The point isn't technique. It's that the eyes and face need somewhere to be, and the person in front of you is where.

Two earlier books cover this ground properly, and I'll leave it to them. You were waiting to talk is about listening with your reply already loaded, which is the eyes-up version of the half-listen. Let them finish is about coming in before the end. If you find that once the phone's away you're still not quite there, one of those is the next book. But most people find that with the phone gone, listening comes back on its own. The attention that was going to the screen

has nowhere else to go, and it goes to the person, and the person notices, and tells you more, and the more gives your eyes something to do.

One small warning. In the first week, the full attention can feel intense, to you and to them. A partner who's used to telling you things over a lit face might be briefly thrown by being looked at. Let it be odd for a day or two. It settles into the ordinary thing it always was.

The decision

Here's the rule, in one sentence. **When someone is talking to me, the phone is out of my hands and out of my sight, and if I genuinely need it, I say so before I look.**

The rule has three parts and each does a job. The first part, out of my hands, ends the half-listen, because chapter 3 argued that the phone in the hand is the thing that takes the attention. The second, out of my sight, ends the tug with a screen attached, because chapters 16 and 17 argued that face down on the table isn't away. The third, say so before I look, keeps the genuine exception alive and keeps it genuine, because chapter 18 argued that a look you have to announce is one you'll only take when it's worth announcing.

Three plans for the moments the rule is most likely to break, in the form of when-then, which is the form there's some evidence that plans work in.

When we sit down to eat, then my phone goes in the bag or the hall before the food's on the table. Meals have a start, so this is the easiest fixed point, and it's the one children see most.

When I'm on my phone and someone starts talking to me, then it goes down and my eyes come up before I've decided whether to. Not after this message. Now. The deciding is where the glance lives.

When the tug comes mid-story, then I notice it, name it, and let it pass, and if it's the phone lighting, I let it light. It'll still be lit in ten minutes.

What to expect. The tug will be louder for a fortnight, then quieter, though I have no study of this habit's timeline and I'm going on habits in general. Meals will get longer within a week and you may not notice why. A child who'd been escalating will escalate less, and a child who'd gone quiet may take longer to start again, because trust comes back slower than it goes. A partner will notice inside a month or won't say, and either is fine. And there'll be an evening when you look up from a story you've heard all of and realise the phone has been in the hall for two hours and you never thought about it. That's the habit gone, and it's quieter than you'd think.

Babies, teenagers, the work phone, the partner who won't, and when it's more than a habit

Babies. Feeding a baby is long and repetitive and the phone is a natural companion to it, and the baby can't tell you a story. But the still-face research in chapter 8 is about exactly this age. The baby is reading your face during the feed, and a face in a screen is a face that isn't answering. I'm not going to say never. Feeds are long. I'd say the first minutes and the last, when the baby is looking at you, are yours and theirs, and the middle can have the phone if it needs it. And the reported link between more frequent phone use and less recovery in Myruski's infants is worth holding in mind, even as one study.

Teenagers. They're on their phones more than you are, and you'll want the rule to apply to them, and it should. But it applies to you first, for a month, before you mention it. A teenager can spot a rule that's aimed at them and not kept by the person aiming it from across the house. When you do raise it, raise it as a house rule for meals, with you included, and not as a verdict on them. The reciprocity argument in chapter 10 is the whole approach.

The work phone. If you're on call, that's a real exception and the method already covers it. Say at the start of the evening that you're on call, and what that means, and take the calls. What the on-call status doesn't cover is the email, the chat, and the "just checking" that fills the evening in its name. A later book in this series is about answering work messages at all hours. For now, on call means calls.

The partner who won't. If you're reading this because your partner is the one with the lit face, chapter 10 is where to start. Do your own half without announcing it. Then, after some weeks, ask plainly and once. If the ask doesn't land and the glance is part of a wider sense of not being listened to, that's bigger than this book, and the ordinary route for it is a conversation about the relationship and not about the phone.

When it's more than a habit. Some phone use isn't a habit. If you feel anxious when the phone is out of reach, if you check it in a loop that doesn't end, if you've tried to cut down and found you couldn't, or if the checking is tied to a worry that something has gone wrong, this book's method will feel like being asked to hold your breath. An earlier book, *You've checked already*, is about compulsive checking. And if the phone use sits inside a low mood that's been there most days for a fortnight or more, or an anxiety that's affecting your daily life, the NHS advice is to see a GP, and I'd put that before any rule about the dinner table.

When you looked down again

You'll glance. A fortnight in, a month in, a year in. Someone will be telling you something and the phone will light and your eyes will go, and you'll catch yourself, or they'll catch you.

The first thing to know is that one glance isn't the habit back. The habit was fifty glances a day with no awareness of any of them. One glance you noticed is the opposite of that. It's the habit surfacing where you can see it, and a seen glance is one you can end, which you do by looking up and saying "sorry, go on", as in chapter 18. That's the whole repair. Not a speech.

The second is that a bad evening isn't a bad month. If you've had a night of the old pattern, the phone on the arm of the sofa and the half-listen and the "mm", that's information. Something put the phone back within reach. Tiredness, usually, or a day that needed the twenty minutes from chapter 11 and didn't get them. Give the phone its twenty minutes tomorrow, on its own, before you walk in. Then put it in the hall.

The third is to ask which belief did it. Every glance has one of the chapters from 3 to 12 behind it. "It might be important" is the commonest, and the answer is that it'll ring. "I'm listening" is the next, and the answer is chapter 3. Find the belief, reread the chapter, and the glance loses its reason.

Don't keep a streak. A streak makes one glance a failure, and a failure makes the next one easier, because the record's spoiled anyway. There's no record. There's a rule, and an evening, and the

phone in the hall, and that's tonight's whole job.

And don't apologise beyond the once. The other person doesn't need to be told how sorry you are or how hard you've been trying. They need your face back, and then they need to finish the story.

The face across the table, lit by nothing

Your partner's telling you about a meeting. The phone's in the hall, where it went before you sat down, and it's lit up out there for all you know. Somebody said something and somebody else reacted and the point is coming, and you can see it coming on their face, and they can see you seeing it. The point lands. It's a better story than you expected, because it's the whole one.

At the park, your daughter says "watch this", and you're watching, and she does the thing, and she doesn't ask if you saw, because she saw you seeing. Across the cafe table, your friend says the thing about their marriage, and the phone doesn't buzz on the wood because it's in your bag on the floor, and they don't say "anyway", and the next hour is one you'll both remember.

None of this took effort in the moment. The effort was in the hall, and it was the effort of putting a phone down. Everything after was just a conversation, the kind people had for a very long time before there was anything to glance at, and the kind they can still have, whenever the thing that interrupts it is somewhere else.

One action, tonight. Before the next meal, put the phone where you'd have to stand up to reach it. Then sit down and look up.

Notes

These notes give the sources behind each chapter and say where the book leans on my own reasoning. Nothing in this book is medical advice. If phone use is tied to anxiety, compulsive checking or low mood, see a GP.

All papers were checked against the PubMed record, the publisher's record on Crossref, or the OpenAlex record on 26 September 2026, and none carried a retraction or correction notice. Most were read as abstracts only, and the notes say so where it matters. The partner at dinner, the daughter on the climbing frame and the friend in the cafe are invented examples.

Chapter 1. The three scenes are invented. The counting exercise is my suggestion and hasn't been tested.

Chapter 2. The six reasons are my summary of what people say. No source.

Chapter 3. Dwyer, Kushlev and Dunn, "Smartphone use undermines enjoyment of face-to-face social interactions", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 78, 2018, pages 233 to 239. Over three hundred community members and students in the first study, phones on the table or put away, with distraction as the mediator, and an experience sampling second study. Abstract only. This paper was also used in the earlier book *The phone can wait*. Kushlev and Dunn, "Smartphones distract parents from cultivating feelings of connection when spending time with their children", *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 36, 2019, pages 1619 to

1639. A field experiment at a science museum with parents assigned to frequent or infrequent phone use, and a week-long diary study. Abstract only. The abstract's opening figure about American smartphone users is left out because its source isn't given there. Ward, Duke, Gneezy and Bos, "Brain drain: the mere presence of one's own smartphone reduces available cognitive capacity", *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* 2, 2017, pages 140 to 154. Two experiments. Abstract only, from OpenAlex. The claim that you keep the words and lose the person is my interpretation.

Chapter 4. Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas, "The effects of 'phubbing' on social interaction", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 48, 2018, pages 304 to 316. Participants watched a three-minute animation of a two-person conversation in which the partner phubbed them extensively, partially or not at all. Abstract only, from Crossref. The abstract reports that increased phubbing reduced perceived communication quality and relationship satisfaction, mediated by belongingness and affect. It doesn't report the partial condition separately, and my claim that partial phubbing wasn't safe is an inference from "increased phubbing". The account of the drop, from the first flicker to the full return, is mine.

Chapter 5. Radesky, Kistin, Zuckerman, Nitzberg, Gross, Kaplan-Sanoff, Augustyn and Silverstein, "Patterns of mobile device use by caregivers and children during meals in fast food restaurants", *Pediatrics* 133, 2014, pages e843 to e849. Fifty-five caregivers observed, forty of whom used a device, qualitative analysis. Abstract only. The abstract reports the range of child responses

from entertaining themselves to escalating bids for attention, and that highly absorbed caregivers often responded harshly to misbehaviour. Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas as above. The claim about why nobody says anything is mine.

Chapter 6. Reed, Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff, "Learning on hold: cell phones sidetrack parent-child interactions", *Developmental Psychology* 53, 2017, pages 1428 to 1436. Thirty-eight mothers and their two-year-olds, within-subjects, one of two teaching periods interrupted by a phone call. Abstract only. The two classes of message and the ten-minute test are my reasoning, as in the earlier book *The phone can wait*, which makes a related argument.

Chapter 7. Przybylski and Weinstein, "Can you connect with me now? How the presence of mobile communication technology influences face-to-face conversation quality", *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 30, 2013, pages 237 to 246. Two experiments. Abstract only. Misra, Cheng, Genevie and Yuan, "The iPhone effect", *Environment and Behavior* 48, 2016, pages 275 to 298. A hundred pairs, ten-minute conversations, casual or meaningful topic, observer noted phone on table or in hand. Abstract only. Crowley, Allred, Follon and Volkmer, "Replication of the mere presence hypothesis: the effects of cell phones on face-to-face conversations", *Communication Studies* 69, 2018, pages 283 to 293. Partial replication that found no effect of phone presence on relational quality or empathy. Abstract only, from OpenAlex. The earlier book *The phone can wait* left the mere presence studies out because of the mixed replications, and this book uses them only for

the meaningful-topic point, with the failed replication stated. The claim that the ordinary story is the audition for the meaningful one is mine.

Chapter 8. Myruski, Gulyayeva, Birk, Pérez-Edgar, Buss and Dennis-Tiwary, "Digital disruption? Maternal mobile device use is related to infant social-emotional functioning", *Developmental Science* 21, 2018, e12610. Fifty infants aged 7 to 24 months, modified still-face paradigm with phone use in the still phase, plus parent-reported typical use. Abstract only. The description of the original still-face procedure is drawn from the abstract's description of the three phases. Tronick and colleagues' 1978 paper introducing the paradigm was found on PubMed but has no abstract there and wasn't read, so it isn't cited in the text. The extension to adults is my interpretation.

Chapter 9. McDaniel and Radesky, "Technoference: longitudinal associations between parent technology use, parenting stress, and child behavior problems", *Pediatric Research* 84, 2018, pages 210 to 218. A hundred and eighty-three couples with a child aged 0 to 5, surveyed at baseline, one, three and six months, cross-lagged models. Abstract only. McDaniel and Radesky, "Technoference: parent distraction with technology and associations with child behavior problems", *Child Development* 89, 2018, pages 100 to 109. A hundred and seventy families, parent report, cross-sectional. Abstract only. Both abstracts say the direction of effects isn't settled. Radesky 2014 as above. The distinction between availability and the glance is mine.

Chapter 10. No research source. The argument about norms and reciprocity is mine. The earlier books referred to are The next move is yours and They can't read your mind.

Chapter 11. No research source. The argument about timing is mine. The later book referred to is on bringing work home in your head.

Chapter 12. No research source. The distinction between the shared screen and the glance is mine.

Chapter 13. Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas as above, for belongingness as the mediator. The claim that the message is about rank is my interpretation. The earlier book is They can't read your mind.

Chapter 14. Radesky 2014 as above. The reading of the range of child responses as stages rather than types is mine, and the abstract doesn't support it directly. The account of how partners adjust is my observation.

Chapter 15. Dwyer and colleagues, and Kushlev and Dunn 2019, as above. McDaniel, Uva, Pater, Cornet, Drouin and Radesky, "Daily smartphone use predicts parent depressive symptoms, but parents' perceptions of responsiveness to their child moderate this effect", Frontiers in Developmental Psychology 2, 2024. Two hundred and sixty-four parents of infants over eight days, phone use measured by passive sensing, multilevel models. Abstract only. The abstract reports a within-person daily association between phone use

around the infant and depressed mood, absent on days of higher perceived responsiveness. The claim about the flatness at the end of the evening is mine.

Chapter 16. Ward and colleagues as above. The claim that the tug thins over a couple of weeks isn't from any study of this habit. The earlier book is The feeling will pass without help.

Chapter 17. Dwyer and colleagues, and Misra and colleagues, as above, for phones on the table. Ward and colleagues as above. The earlier book is The phone can wait. The later book referred to is on using a phone while driving.

Chapter 18. No research source. The earlier book is You've apologised enough. The guess of one or two genuine exceptions a week is mine.

Chapter 19. No research source. The earlier books are You were waiting to talk and Let them finish.

Chapter 20. When-then plans are drawn from Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119, as used in earlier books in this series. The rule hasn't been tested as a package and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 21. Myruski and colleagues as above. The NHS advice on low mood lasting two weeks or more and on anxiety affecting daily life is as recorded for earlier books in this series. The earlier book

on checking is You've checked already. The later book referred to is on answering work messages at all hours. No claim is made about the effectiveness of any service.

Chapter 22. No research source.

Looked up and not used. Roberts and David, "My life has become a major distraction from my cell phone: partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction among romantic partners", *Computers in Human Behavior* 54, 2016, pages 134 to 141. No abstract was available from Crossref, OpenAlex or Semantic Scholar, so it isn't cited. The same authors' papers on phone use by managers, 2017 and 2020, likewise. Stockdale, Coyne and Padilla-Walker, "Parent and child technoference and socioemotional behavioral outcomes", *Computers in Human Behavior* 88, 2018, pages 219 to 226. No abstract available. Ophir, Nass and Wagner, "Cognitive control in media multitaskers", *PNAS* 106, 2009, is about heavy media multitaskers as a group and not about phone use in conversation, so it isn't cited. Blachnio and colleagues' twenty-country studies of the phubbing scale, 2021, concern the measure and its relationship to distress, and weren't needed.