

# The phone can wait

A short book about reaching for your phone in every spare moment, and why it doesn't rest you

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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## Before you start

This is a short book. You can read it in two or three evenings, and I'd rather you read it on paper or on something that doesn't also hold your messages.

It's about one habit. There's a spare moment, in a queue or a lift or the two minutes before a meeting starts, and your phone is in your hand before you've decided anything. You look at the same few things you looked at a quarter of an hour ago. The moment was supposed to be a small rest. You come out of it slightly more tired than you went in, and if you add up a day of those moments you come out of the day the same way.

I'm not going to tell you to get rid of your phone, or to go back to one that only makes calls. A phone is a map, a bank, a camera, a train ticket and the way your family reaches you. Nothing in this book asks you to give any of that up. I'm also not going to tell you that scrolling is rotting your brain. I don't think the evidence says that, and you've heard the lecture before without it changing anything.

What I'll argue is narrower. Using your phone for something and reaching for it for nothing are two different acts that look the same from across the room. The first is mostly fine. The second promises a rest and doesn't deliver one, and it uses up the small empty moments that were doing more for you than you knew. You can learn to tell the two apart, keep the first, and do a lot less of the second.

One caution before we start. This book treats the reach as a habit, because for most people that's what it is. For some people the phone is doing a heavier job. It may be covering low mood, or loneliness, or anxiety that comes up whenever things go quiet. It may be the way into gambling, or spending, or pornography that has got out of hand. Those are different problems from the one in this book, and chapter 13 says where to take them. If you take medication for your mood or for anxiety, nothing here is a reason to stop it or change the dose.

The middle chapters each take one belief that makes the reach seem sensible. "It's a rest." "It's only a minute." "There might be something." "I'm bored." Each one is partly true, and I'll try to give it its due before I argue with it.

Some of the arguments rest on research. The notes at the back say which studies, and how far I think they can be trusted. The rest is my own reasoning, and I'll say so where it matters.

## While the kettle boils

Here's an example. You go into the kitchen to make tea. You fill the kettle and switch it on, and it will take about two minutes to boil. Somewhere in the first ten seconds your phone comes out of your pocket. You didn't decide to take it out. If somebody had stopped you and asked what you were about to look up, you wouldn't have had an answer.

You open your messages, and there's nothing since you last looked, which was in the hall. You open the news and read a headline and half a paragraph. You open the app with the photos and thumb past a holiday, an advert for trainers, and a dog. The kettle clicks off. You go on for another minute or two anyway, because you're halfway through a video of a man restoring a rusty vice. The tea, when you get to it, is a bit stewed.

Nothing bad has happened. That's part of what makes this habit hard to take seriously. No single reach costs anything you'd notice. It's only when you look at the whole day that a pattern shows. The same thing happened in the lift, and at the traffic lights on foot, and while the computer started up, and in the queue at the chemist. It happened in the loo, and during the adverts, and in the car outside the school before you went in. Every gap in the day got filled, and they all got filled with the same thing.

If that's familiar, you'll probably also recognise how the evening feels. You haven't done anything strenuous, and yet your head feels used. You've taken in a great deal and can recall almost none of it. You've had a dozen little rests and you don't feel rested.

I want to split two things that usually travel under one name, which is "being on my phone".

The first I'll call an errand. An errand is picking up the phone to do something you could name before you touched it. You're checking the time of the train, or answering your sister, or paying the window cleaner. You might be looking up how long to roast a chicken, or ringing the surgery. An errand has an end. When the train time is on the screen, the errand is over. This book has no quarrel with errands, however many of them you run in a day.

The second I'll call a reach. A reach is picking up the phone with nothing in mind. It doesn't start from a task, it starts from a gap, and what starts it is the emptiness of the moment and not anything the phone is for. Because it didn't begin with a purpose, nothing marks the point where it's finished. It stops when something from outside stops it. The kettle clicks, or the lift doors open, or someone says your name for the second time.

I'll use the word gap for the spare moments themselves. A gap is any short stretch in which nothing is required of you. It might be two minutes while something boils, or five in a waiting room, or the walk from the car to the door. A day contains dozens of them. Until quite recently they were simply empty, and nobody thought of that as a problem that needed solving.

There's one more term. Most people's reaches go to the same three or four places in the same order. For one person it's messages, then news, then photos, and for another it's email, then the football,

then videos. I'll call that round the loop. You can go round the loop, find nothing new, and start round it again without noticing that you've done so.

The line between an errand and a reach isn't always sharp. A real errand can turn into a reach at the moment it's finished. You answer your sister, and then, since the phone is already in your hand, you go round the loop. I'd count that as an errand followed by a reach. The test is simple enough. Could you have said, before you picked it up, what you were picking it up for? And when that was done, did you put it down?

Here's what this book doesn't claim. It doesn't claim phones are bad, or that time on a screen is wasted time. It doesn't claim that you're addicted. Chapter 9 explains why I think that word points you at the wrong remedy. And it doesn't claim the things in the loop are worthless. Some of them are funny or useful or made by people you love. The claim is about the reach alone. Reaching in every gap doesn't give you what it seems to promise, and it takes something you'd want back if you noticed it going.

I'd like you to do one small thing before the next chapter, and it involves no change to what you do. Tomorrow, keep a scrap of paper and a pen in your pocket. Each time you find the phone in your hand without an errand, put a mark on the paper. Don't try to reach less. You'll miss plenty of them, which is fine. At the end of the day, count the marks, and keep the paper. We'll come back to it.

## What the reach pays

Nobody does something eighty times a day for no reason. If the reach were pure loss you'd have dropped it years ago. So before I argue with it, I want to set out what it gives you, as fairly as I can. I count five payments.

The first is a way out of the empty moment. Standing in a kitchen with nothing to do for two minutes is a mildly uncomfortable state for most people. The discomfort is slight, about the size of an itch, but it's there. The phone removes it at once. This is the payment that fires every time, and I think it's the main one.

The second is the chance of something nice. Most times round the loop there's nothing. Now and then there's a message from someone you like, or good news, or a thing that makes you laugh out loud on a train. You can't know which sort of time this is without looking. The possibility is a small pleasure in itself, a little like hearing the letterbox.

The third is the feeling of being in touch. You see what your friends are doing and what the world is talking about. You feel like a person who's connected to other people and knows what's going on.

The fourth is the feeling of being on top of things. The inbox has been looked at and nothing is on fire. Nobody is waiting for you without your knowing about it. For people whose work comes through the phone, this one can feel less like a payment and more like a duty.

The fifth is a way out of something hard. You're writing a difficult email, or doing your accounts, or listening to a child explain a game for the ninth minute. Attention strains, and the phone offers it somewhere easier to go. The gap, in this case, is one you've made yourself in the middle of a task.

Those are real. I'd ask you to notice one thing about them, though. Four of the five are feelings that last about as long as the reach does. The relief from the empty moment is over as soon as the next empty moment arrives. The feeling of being in touch isn't the same as having been in touch with anybody. The feeling of being on top of things fades within minutes, which is why you check again. Only the second payment, the occasional nice thing, leaves you with something. And the nice thing would still have been there at six o'clock.

Now the costs. None of them is dramatic, and that's why they go uncounted.

The first is the one in the title of this book. The reach presents itself as a rest and it isn't one. Chapter 3 makes that case properly. For now I'll just say that a tired mind needs less to deal with, and a phone gives it more.

The second is the gaps themselves. A gap that's been filled is gone. Chapter 11 is about what gaps were quietly doing, which includes letting your mind settle between one thing and the next. It also includes noticing that you're thirsty, or tired, or that your daughter looks worried.

The third is that the reach rarely stays the length of the gap. The kettle takes two minutes and the reach takes six. Some of the reaches in a day turn into twenty minutes you'd have spent otherwise if anyone had asked you.

The fourth is what it does to whatever you were in the middle of. A task you leave and come back to is harder to pick up than one you stayed with. Chapter 8 is about that.

The fifth is that your mood gets handed to the loop. You pick the phone up feeling all right. Thirty seconds later you've read about a war, seen a former colleague's new kitchen, and found an email with "quick question" in the subject line. You didn't choose any of those. They just happened to be what was there.

The sixth falls on other people. Someone who's with you while you're on your phone has less of you, and they can tell. I'll keep that one short, because you know it already and guilt isn't the engine of this book.

The last cost is the oddest. The habit feeds itself. The more gaps you fill, the less practice you get at leaving one empty, and the more uncomfortable an empty gap becomes. So the phone is relieving a discomfort that it has also helped to build up. I'm offering that as my interpretation and not as a finding. Chapter 6 gives the evidence that points that way.

Here's a question to carry through the rest of the book. When you find the phone in your hand, ask, "What did I pick this up for?" If there's an answer, you're on an errand, and you can carry on with

it. If there's no answer, that was a reach. You don't have to do anything about it yet. For now, the point is only to see how often there's no answer.

## "It's a rest"

This is the belief at the centre of the habit, so I'll take it first. You've been concentrating for an hour, or dealing with people, or carrying shopping. You sit down with the phone for five minutes and it feels like putting a weight down. You aren't working, and nobody's asking you for anything. Surely that counts as a break.

It's an understandable belief, because part of it is true. You have stopped doing the tiring thing, and stopping is the first half of a rest. There's also a kind of ease in scrolling. Nothing in it is difficult, and it asks for no effort that you can feel.

The second half of a rest is where it goes wrong. A tired mind recovers when it has less to process for a while. Think about what thirty seconds of the loop contains. There's a headline to read and react to, and a photo of someone you know, which sets off a small comparison whether you want it or not. Then there's an advert to ignore, which takes a tiny act of ignoring. After that comes a message to read and a decision about whether to answer now or later. Each item is light. But each one is something to take in, judge and respond to, and they arrive several a minute. That is the same kind of work that made you tired in the first place, done in smaller pieces. It's a bit like taking a break from reading reports by reading a different, more colourful report.

Two studies have tested this directly. In the first, two researchers at Rutgers Business School gave 414 people a set of word puzzles, a demanding task. Partway through, some of them took a short break, during which they chose items for a shopping list. Some did

the break on a phone, some on a computer, and some on paper. A fourth group had no break at all. Then everyone went back to the puzzles. The people who took their break on paper or on a computer came back refreshed and did better in the second half. The people who took the same break on a phone didn't. They took longer over the second half and solved fewer puzzles than the other two break groups. On speed, they were no different from the people who'd had no break at all. On puzzles solved they landed in between, a little ahead of the no-break group and well behind the paper and computer groups.

That study was done in a lab, with an artificial break. The second was done in real offices. Researchers in the Netherlands followed 83 PhD students through their working days. An app logged every use of their phones, and once an hour they rated how tired and how bored they felt. The results ran in both directions. The more tired or bored people were, the more likely they were to pick up the phone, which is what you'd expect. But after they'd used the phone, they reported more fatigue and more boredom than before. The authors called that result surprising. It was the opposite of what theories of work breaks had predicted.

I should be straight about the limits. The second study observed people and didn't run an experiment on them, so it can't prove the phone caused the extra tiredness. The authors say as much, and they describe their results as exploratory. One of their suggested explanations is the cost of switching back and forth between two kinds of activity. The first study used one kind of break and one

kind of task. Neither study settles the matter alone. But they point the same way, and it's the way your own evenings have been pointing.

There's a fair objection. "I enjoy it. When I watch something funny on the sofa at nine o'clock, I feel better afterwards, not worse." I believe you. Half an hour of things you like, chosen and sat down to, is entertainment, and entertainment is a good thing. I'd only ask you to call it that. Watching a film isn't rest either, and nobody minds, because nobody puts a film on for ninety seconds in a lift expecting to come out restored. The trouble comes from asking the phone to do a job it can't do. Chapter 12 makes room for the sofa at nine.

So it's worth being clear about what a short rest is. It's a few minutes in which less comes in. You might look out of a window, or stand in the kitchen while the kettle boils and do nothing else. You could walk to the end of the corridor and back, or shut your eyes on a train. None of those is exciting. That's the point of them, because they're the conditions under which attention comes back.

You can test this on yourself. After your next reach, as you put the phone down, ask whether you feel more rested or less than when you picked it up. Don't go by how it felt while you were scrolling. Go by how you feel once it's over.

## "It's only a minute"

The reach defends itself with its size. It's a minute, and nobody's life was ever ruined by a minute. You'd feel silly making a rule about something so small.

Taken one at a time, that's right. The trouble is that you don't get to take them one at a time, and your own sense of how many there are isn't reliable. In a small British study, researchers installed a logging app on people's phones for two weeks, and also asked them to estimate their use. Twenty-three people gave usable data. They guessed they picked up their phones about 37 times a day. The app recorded about 85. More than half of those uses lasted under thirty seconds. Their estimates of total time were reasonably good, but their estimates of how often were not. Across the group, people's guesses bore no relation to their real counts.

That's one small study of students and university staff, and your number will be your own. If you kept the tally from chapter 1, you have a rough figure. Whatever it is, the real one is higher, because the ones you caught were only the ones you noticed. I'd guess that's the most useful thing the tally shows. A large share of the reaches happen below the level at which you make decisions at all.

So the first problem with "only a minute" is multiplication. The second is that the minute often isn't one. A reach has no built-in end, as chapter 1 said. It lasts until something interrupts it. While the kettle boils, the kettle interrupts it. On the sofa at ten past nine,

nothing does. Most people know the experience of looking up and finding that forty minutes have gone, with no memory of having chosen to spend them.

The third problem is the most interesting one, and it's about what the minute does to the time around it.

A researcher called Sophie Leroy ran two experiments on what happens when people switch from one task to another. She found that attention doesn't switch cleanly. Part of it stays behind with the first task for a while, still turning it over, and performance on the second task suffers. She called what stays behind attention residue. Her experiments were about switching between pieces of work, not about phones. But a reach in the middle of something is a switch away and a switch back, so you pay twice. When you return, part of your mind is still on the headline about interest rates or the message you decided to answer later.

A second piece of research adds something. Gloria Mark and her colleagues interrupted people while they worked on a task and measured what happened. The interrupted people did finish, and the quality of their work held up. They managed it by working faster. They also reported more stress, more frustration, more time pressure and more effort. Those interruptions came from outside, and a reach is an interruption you make yourself. I can't see why the bill would be smaller for that.

Put those together with the count. A day broken into eighty pieces is a different thing from the same day left whole, even if the total time on the phone is modest. It's like reading a novel one page at a

time, closing the book and putting it back on the shelf between pages. You'd get through it, and you'd wonder why reading had become such hard work.

Here's the honest objection. "Some of my day really is made of scraps. I'm waiting for a file to load. I'm on hold. There's nothing to come back to, so there's nothing to break up." That's fair, and a gap between tasks is a better place for a reach than the middle of one. But notice that the gap between tasks was doing something too. It was the moment when the last thing got put down and the next one got picked up. If you fill it with the loop, you arrive at the next task still carrying three new things that have nothing to do with it.

The practical upshot for now is small. The question isn't whether one reach is harmless, because one reach is. The question is what a day made of eighty of them feels like. You already know what that feels like, and chapter 1 described it.

## **"There might be something"**

A good share of reaches have a particular flavour. You aren't looking for entertainment. You're checking. Someone may have replied, or something may have happened, and there might be an email you need to know about. It would only take a second to find out, and then you could relax.

This belief deserves respect, because sometimes there is something. A friend has said yes to Saturday, or the school has rung. If there were never anything, the habit would have died out long ago.

Think, though, about how often the something arrives. Most times round the loop, there's nothing new, or nothing that matters. Now and then there's a real reward, and you can't predict which time it'll be. It happens that this is the best arrangement anyone has found for making a habit stick. It's one of the oldest findings in the study of learning. A reward that comes every time produces a habit that fades quickly when the reward stops. A reward that comes unpredictably produces a habit that carries on through long runs of nothing. The empty checks don't weaken it. They're part of the pattern that keeps it going.

A group of researchers studied this in phone use in particular. They described what they called a checking habit, a brief, repeated inspection of content that changes and that's quick to get at. In their data the habit was kept going by small informational rewards that arrived fast. They noticed two other things. Checks often led on to other use that the person hadn't intended, which is an errand

or a check turning into a reach. And the people they interviewed didn't describe the habit as a craving. They described it as an annoyance.

If you've ever opened the fridge, found nothing you wanted, and opened it again ten minutes later in case something had appeared, you know the structure. The difference is that the fridge never rewards you, and the phone occasionally does.

So does checking less help, or does it just leave you anxious about what you're missing? Two experiments are useful here, and the second has a result that cuts against the easy answer.

In the first, 124 adults spent one week checking their email as often as they liked and another week limiting themselves to three times a day. In the limited week they reported lower daily stress.

In the second, 237 people had an app installed that controlled their phone notifications. One group got them as normal. One group got them in three batches a day. One group got none at all. The batch group did best. They felt more attentive, more productive, in a better mood and more in control of their phones, and they reported less stress. The group with no notifications at all got few of those gains. They felt more anxious, and more afraid of missing out.

I think that second result is worth taking seriously. It says the checking urge isn't all foolishness. People do need to know that what's important will reach them. If you cut off the information

completely, the need doesn't go away. It just goes unmet, and the person feels worse. What worked was making the information arrive on a schedule the person could trust.

This suggests a split. There's a small class of things that can't wait an hour. A call from the school or a message from your partner would be in it, and whatever your job treats as urgent. There's a very large class of things that can, which is everything else. At the moment both classes come through the same checking habit, so you check eighty times to be sure of the first class. If the first class can reach you by making a noise, you don't need to go looking for it. Chapter 12 turns that into a setup.

There's an experiment you can run for one day first. Each time you check, ask afterwards whether there was anything there that needed you within the hour. Keep a count of yes and no on your scrap of paper. I don't know what your numbers will be. I'd be surprised if the yes column reached five.

## **"I'm bored"**

You're in a queue with four people ahead of you. There's nothing to look at but a rack of cough sweets and the back of a man's coat.

This is boring, and you have in your pocket a device with everything ever written, filmed or sung on it. It seems perverse not to use it.

I'll grant the premise at once. Queues are boring. So are waiting rooms, platforms, and the four minutes it takes a bath to fill. And boredom is unpleasant, more than people like to admit. In a well-known set of studies, a team led by Timothy Wilson asked people to sit alone in a bare room for between six and fifteen minutes, with nothing to do but think. Most didn't enjoy it. In one of the studies, the room contained a button that gave a mild electric shock. Everyone had felt the shock beforehand, and the people counted here had said they'd pay money not to feel it again. Left alone for fifteen minutes, 12 of the 18 men and 6 of the 24 women pressed the button at least once.

So wanting to escape an empty moment is ordinary, and it was ordinary before phones existed. The question for this chapter is whether the phone does cure the boredom.

Two pieces of evidence say it does so less well than it seems to. The first is the Dutch office study from chapter 3. People picked up their phones more when they were bored. Afterwards, they were more bored, not less.

The second is a set of seven experiments from the University of Toronto, with more than 1,200 people in all. They looked at one particular way of using a screen, which is switching. That means skipping from one short video to the next, or jumping forward within one. They found that people switch when they're bored, and that they expect switching to help. When people were made to switch, they ended up more bored than when they watched one thing through. They were also less satisfied, less attentive, and found the videos less meaningful. That held even when they were free to pick videos they liked. The result was weaker and less clear for reading articles and for people who weren't students, and the authors say so. They conclude that enjoyment seems to come from being absorbed in something, and that swiping works against being absorbed.

A reach in a gap is almost all switching. It has to be, because a two-minute gap is too short to get absorbed in anything. You sample six things in ninety seconds and none of them gets hold of you.

The boredom hasn't been removed, only covered over with something that itself becomes boring, which is why the loop has that flat, restless quality. Most people recognise the state of scrolling while bored of scrolling.

You might answer, "Fine, but two minutes of flat scrolling still beats two minutes of cough sweets." I'm not sure it does, and this is where my own interpretation comes in. Boredom in a short gap is mild, and it's over when the gap is over. It also changes if you stay in it for more than a few seconds. Your attention, given nothing, goes looking. It finds the conversation at the counter, or it drifts to what you'll cook tonight, or it lands on something you'd forgotten

to do. That drifting is what chapter 11 is about. If the phone comes out at the first twinge, you never get as far as that part. All you ever experience of an empty gap is its first five seconds, which are the worst ones.

There's a second effect, and I offered it in chapter 2 as the habit feeding itself. If every gap is filled, your tolerance for an unfilled one goes down. Two minutes with nothing to look at starts to feel like a long time. It used to be just two minutes. I can't point to a study that has measured that in gaps, so treat it as a suggestion and test it on yourself.

The test is small. Once a day, for a week, leave one short gap empty on purpose. Choose an easy one, like the kettle. Put the phone in another room first if that helps. Stand there, look out of the window, and see what the two minutes are like on the first day. Then see what they're like on the seventh.

## "It keeps me in touch"

The loop usually includes other people. You see that your cousin has had the baby, that a friend from your old job is in Lisbon, that someone you were at school with has run ten kilometres. It feels like keeping up with them. If you stopped, you might worry that you'd drift out of their lives and they out of yours.

Part of this is true and I don't want to argue it away. Phones carry real contact. A group chat with your brothers can be the best thing on the device. So can a video call with a parent in another country, or a photo of the grandchildren that arrives at lunchtime. All of those are errands in the sense I've been using. You pick up the phone to talk to someone, and someone is on the other end.

The reach is a different activity. Going round the loop, you look at what people have posted. You don't say anything, and they don't know you were there. Researchers make the same split, and they call the two kinds active and passive use. One research team tested the difference. In a lab experiment, they had people use Facebook either actively, posting and messaging, or passively, only browsing. The passive group's mood fell over the hours that followed. The team then followed people in daily life, asking them several times a day how they felt and what they'd been doing. Passive use again predicted a fall in mood, and the route was envy. Active use didn't show the same effect. That was one platform, studied a decade ago, and I wouldn't hang everything on it. But it fits something most people have noticed, which is that an hour of looking at other people's lives leaves you feeling lonelier than before.

The reason isn't mysterious. What people post is the best tenth of what happened to them. Seeing it tells you a little about them and gives them nothing from you. It feels like contact and has the content of reading a newsletter.

There's also what the reach does to the contact you're already in. In a field experiment, more than 300 people went for a meal with friends or family. Half were asked to keep their phones on the table, and half to put them away. The people with phones out enjoyed the meal less, and the reason they gave was feeling distracted. The same researchers then sampled people's days and found the same pattern. When people used their phones during time with others, they enjoyed that time less than when they didn't. One study of restaurant meals doesn't prove a great deal. But the direction is the one you'd expect, and it's the opposite of keeping in touch.

The worry at this point is an obvious one. "If I stop looking, I'll miss the news. I won't know about the baby." You might hear a day later. I'd suggest that finding out about a baby by message from your cousin, or by ringing her, is better than finding out from a post addressed to four hundred people. For the people who matter to you, the loop is a poor substitute for a channel you already have. With the ones who don't matter much, keeping up was never really keeping in touch.

So the reframe is this. Being in touch is something you do, and it involves another person knowing about it. It's an errand, and a good one. The practical version is small. Next time you're on the loop and see something from a person you care about, turn it into

an errand. Send them two lines, or ring them on the way home. If you wouldn't bother doing that, you've learned how much you needed to see the post.

## **"I'll get straight back to it"**

Chapter 2 listed five payments, and the fifth was a way out of something hard. It gets its own chapter because it's where the reach does most damage to the things you care about getting done.

Here's an example. You're writing something difficult, perhaps a reply to a complaint. The first two paragraphs went fine. Now you've come to the part where you have to say no, politely, and you don't know how to put it. You read your last sentence again. Your hand goes to the phone. Four minutes later you come back, read the last sentence again, and you still don't know how to put it.

The belief here is that a quick look will clear your head, and that you'll come back fresher. It's understandable. Stepping away from a stuck problem is good advice, and people have always done it. They got up and made tea, or stared out of the window, or walked round the block.

The Dutch study from chapter 3 found the first half of this pattern in real offices. People were more likely to pick up the phone the more tired or bored they felt at work. That's the strain, followed by the exit. The second half is what happens on return, and that was chapter 4. Attention comes back in pieces, with some of it still on whatever the loop served up. And from chapter 3, a break on a phone refreshed people less than the same break on paper.

So the phone break at the hard point has two faults. It doesn't refresh you much, and it loads you with new material just when you need a clear head. There's a third, which is my own reading.

The point where a task gets hard is often the point where it's about to move. Not knowing how to put the refusal is the work. If you stay in that discomfort for another minute or two, a first clumsy version usually turns up, and a clumsy version can be fixed. Leave at that moment, every time, and you train yourself to leave at that moment. The hard part of every task then becomes the signal to reach.

This applies away from a desk too. The hard bit might be a child's long story, a dull stretch of a meeting, or the point in an argument where you ought to be listening. The strain is the same and the exit is the same.

Here's an objection I'd make myself. "Sometimes I really am stuck, and staring at the sentence doesn't help." Agreed. Then take the break that people took before phones, the one the first study would predict works better. Stand up and get a glass of water, or look at something a long way off. Let the problem sit at the back of your mind while your eyes are on the car park. The difference between that break and a phone break is that nothing new comes in. When you sit down again, the last thing in your head is still the sentence.

One practical step makes more difference here than any amount of resolve. When you sit down to something that matters, put the phone where reaching it takes a walk. A bag in the hall will do, or another room, or a drawer across the office. Chapter 10 explains why that works better than deciding to resist. If your work needs the phone near you, turn it face down and out of arm's reach, and let it ring if it must.

## **"It's built to hook me"**

At some point in the last few years you'll have read that none of this is your fault. The apps are designed by clever people whose job is to keep you looking. The feed has no bottom, the next video starts by itself, and the red badge with a number in it is red for a reason. You're one person against a building full of engineers.

A good deal of that is true. Most of the apps in your loop are free, and they earn their money from advertising, so their income rises with the time you spend in them. Features that lengthen your stay get kept. A feed that never ends removes the natural stopping point that a newspaper has on its last page. Notifications pull you back in when you've left. It would be strange if all that effort had no effect, and I'm not going to pretend it doesn't.

It matters for this book in one specific way. It explains why a reach, once begun, tends to run on. The design does its work after the phone is in your hand.

It explains much less about why the phone got into your hand. Here the best evidence I know comes from a study at the London School of Economics. Thirty-seven people wore small video cameras that recorded their day from their own point of view. The researchers collected about 200 hours of footage and went through it with the wearers afterwards. They counted 1,130 separate uses of a phone. In 89 per cent of them, the person had picked up the phone unprompted. Only 11 per cent began with a notification. They also found that the time between one use and the next stayed much the same wherever people were. It made little difference

whether they were at home or at work, alone or in company. The authors' conclusion was that the disruption comes mainly from habits the users have learned, more than from the devices.

That finding has a consequence. If you've switched off your notifications and found that you still reach as much as ever, this is why. Switching them off is worth doing, and chapter 12 includes it. But it deals with one reach in nine. The other eight start with you, in a gap, with no prompt from anyone.

I find that encouraging, though it may not sound it. You can't redesign an app. A learned habit is within your reach to change, because it lives in your routines and your pockets and not in a building in California. You can be angry at the companies and I think some anger is justified. It just doesn't do anything about the next time the kettle is on.

This is also the place to deal with the word addiction. People use it freely about phones, usually about themselves, and usually half joking. Two researchers in Barcelona reviewed the studies on so-called smartphone addiction and asked whether the label was earned. They concluded that it wasn't. Heavy use can look like addiction from the outside, with loss of control and some harm. But the consequences don't reach the severity that the word implies in medicine. They recommended calling it problematic use, and looking at what the use is doing for the person. Not every researcher agrees, and the argument continues.

I side with them for a practical reason. If you believe you're addicted, you'll expect a fight with cravings, and you'll think in terms of quitting and relapsing. You'll also look for a remedy built

for a much heavier problem. If you see a habit, you'll look at cues and routines, and you'll expect to change it the way habits are changed. The people interviewed for the checking study in chapter 5 had it about right when they called their checking an annoyance. The next chapter is about how annoyances of this kind get changed.

## "I've got no willpower"

Most people who've tried to cut down have tried the same way. They resolved to use the phone less, and they meant it. It worked until about eleven the next morning. The conclusion they drew was about their character.

I'd draw a different one. Willpower is the wrong tool for this job, and the failure says more about the tool than about you. Consider what resisting a reach by willpower would involve. The phone is in your pocket or within arm's length for sixteen hours a day. Picking it up takes one second and no effort. The cue is any empty moment, and those come dozens of times a day. Most of the time, as the tally showed, the reach begins before you've noticed it. To resist by willpower you'd need to catch an action that starts below your awareness, eighty times a day, and win each time. Nobody does that with anything.

Habits in general work like this. A cue turns up, an easy action follows it, and a small reward follows that. With enough repeats the cue triggers the action without any decision in between. That's a good system. It's how you drive a car and make toast without using up your attention. It means, though, that a habit isn't much affected by your opinions about it. It's affected by whether the cue turns up, and by how easy the action is.

Angela Duckworth and two colleagues wrote a useful review of this. They sorted the ways people control themselves along a timeline, from early to late. The late method is the familiar one. The temptation is in front of you and you grit your teeth. The early

methods work on the situation before the impulse has formed, by choosing where you'll be and what will be within reach. One of their own examples is a student who goes to the library and leaves the phone at home. They argue that the early methods are the more effective ones, because impulses grow stronger with time and are easiest to deal with before they've begun. They add a nice observation, which is that people tend to undervalue these methods for the same reason that they work. There's no struggle involved, so it doesn't feel like self-control, and may even feel like cheating.

It isn't cheating. A person who doesn't keep biscuits in the house isn't weaker than one who keeps them and resists. She's thought about it earlier in the day, when thinking was easy.

Applied to the phone, the early methods come down to two. The first is distance. A phone in your pocket can be in your hand in a second, before any thought. A phone on the shelf in the hall takes a walk of twenty steps, and twenty steps is long enough to notice what you're doing and ask what for. I don't know of anything simpler that works as well. The second is friction inside the phone. If the apps in your loop are on the first screen and logged in, going round the loop takes three taps. If they're in a folder on the last screen, or you have to type a password each time, each reach costs a little more, and some of them won't seem worth it.

Most people reply to this with, "I need my phone on me. People have to be able to reach me." Most people do need to be reachable. But being reachable means you can hear it ring, which doesn't require it to be touching your body. A phone on the hall shelf with the ringer on is reachable. We managed for a century with

telephones that were fixed to the wall. Outside the house, the pocket is the only place for it, and there the friction has to do more of the work. A zipped bag pocket is better than a trouser pocket. A coat pocket is better than your hand.

I'm not saying no effort is needed. You'll still get the urge with the phone twenty steps away, and chapter 12 covers what to do with it. The point is that the urge you feel with the phone in the hall is weaker, and you'll actually notice it, and it arrives with time to think. Willpower can handle that one.

## **"What would I do with the gaps?"**

This is a fear more than a belief, and it isn't always put into words. If you stopped filling every spare moment, you'd have dozens of empty ones a day. It's not obvious what they'd be for. There's a quieter worry underneath, which is what might come up in them.

I'll start with the honest part. Empty moments aren't always pleasant. Two Harvard researchers used a phone app to ask people, at random points in the day, what they were doing, whether their mind was on it, and how they felt. They found people's minds were on something other than what they were doing almost half the time. People were, on average, less happy at those moments than when their minds were on the task. The paper's title says a wandering mind is an unhappy mind. So I won't tell you that an empty gap is a small holiday. Sometimes your mind will drift to the argument with your brother or the state of your savings.

I'd set three things against that.

The first is that the thoughts don't go away when you cover them. The argument with your brother is still there at eleven at night, when the phone goes off and the room goes dark. That's a poor time to meet it for the first time that day. Two minutes of it by the kettle, in daylight, is a cheaper place to have the thought. It's also the kind of moment when "I should just ring him" occurs to a person.

The second is that a drifting mind does useful work that doesn't feel like work. One experiment gave people a creative problem, then a break, then the same problem again. During the break some people did a demanding task, some did an easy task that let their minds wander, and some simply rested. A fourth group had no break. The easy-task group improved most on the problems they'd already seen. The benefit went with how much their minds had wandered. It didn't depend on thinking about the problem directly. That's one lab study, using one kind of puzzle. But it matches the old observation that answers tend to arrive in the shower or on a walk, and rarely at the desk. A gap with a boiling kettle in it is close to the conditions in that experiment. With a phone in it, the gap is more like the demanding task.

The third is my own list of what gaps do, and you can check it against your experience. In a gap you find out how you are. You notice you're thirsty, or your shoulders are up by your ears, or you're more tired than you thought. Tomorrow also gets planned in gaps, without your sitting down to plan it. That's where you remember the form that has to be back by Friday. A gap finishes off the last thing too. The conversation you've just had settles, and you realise what she meant. And you see what's in front of you, which sometimes includes your own children.

None of those happens on demand. They happen when nothing else is happening. A day with no gaps has no room for them, and I think that accounts for some of the feeling chapter 1 described, of a head that feels used without much having been done.

So the answer to "what would I do with the gaps?" is that you wouldn't do anything. A gap doesn't need filling with a better activity. I'd steer you away from resolving to use your spare moments for language apps or breathing exercises. That's the same filling with more worthy material. A person waiting for a kettle doesn't need a project.

If what comes up in the quiet is more than ordinary drift, that's different. If every unfilled moment brings dread, or a low mood settles in, the phone may have been doing a heavier job for you. Chapter 13 says what to do about that, and it's worth doing.

## The decision

Everything so far has been about seeing the habit clearly. This chapter is about what to do, and it starts with a rule.

**The phone comes out for an errand, and it goes away when the errand is done.**

That's all of it. It doesn't limit how many errands you run, or say which apps are allowed. There are no screen-time targets in it. It asks for two things. Know what you're picking it up for, and put it down when that's finished.

Notice what the rule doesn't ask. It doesn't ask you to give anything up for good, and there's some evidence that you shouldn't try. A German experiment split 619 people into three groups. One gave up their smartphones entirely for a week. One cut their daily use by an hour. One carried on as normal. Both changes helped. People reported less anxiety and low mood, and more satisfaction with life. But four months later, the gains had held up better in the group that cut down than in the group that went without. The authors' conclusion was that complete abstinence isn't necessary. I'd add that it isn't sustainable either, for a device that holds your train ticket.

Here's the method I'd suggest for keeping the rule. It has six parts. Each part rests on something from the earlier chapters. The combination is mine and nobody has tested it as a package.

**Name the errand.** Before you unlock the phone, say what it's for. Say it in your head, or aloud if you're alone. "Train times." "Answer Dan." If nothing comes, that was a reach, and you can put the phone down again with nothing lost. This is the whole rule in three seconds, and it's the part to keep if you keep nothing else.

**Give the phone a home.** At home, the phone lives in one place that isn't your pocket. A shelf in the hall or a spot on the kitchen counter will do. The ringer is on, so calls reach you. You go to it for errands and leave it there after. At work, its place is a bag or a drawer. This is the distance from chapter 10, and it does more than any of the other parts.

**Leave short gaps empty.** If a gap is shorter than about five minutes, it stays empty. That covers the kettle, the lift, the queue and the adverts. You don't need to do anything in it. The first week, these will feel longer than they are.

**Have sittings.** The things in your loop aren't banned. If you like the photos, the football or the videos, have them on purpose. Sit down at a time you've chosen, enjoy them, and stop at a time you've chosen. I call that a sitting. It might be twenty minutes after lunch and half an hour on the sofa at nine. A sitting is entertainment, as chapter 3 said, and it's better entertainment than the same material taken in ninety-second scraps. Set a timer if the end tends to slide. When you feel a reach coming at eleven in the morning, the answer is "at lunch", which is much easier to accept than "never".

**Sort your notifications once.** Go through the settings one time and make two classes. Things that can't wait an hour may make a noise. For most people those are calls, and messages from a handful of named people. Everything else is silent with no badge, and gets looked at in a sitting or when you choose. This follows the batching experiment from chapter 5. The urgent things can reach you, so you don't need to go looking for them.

**Add friction to the loop.** Move the loop apps off the first screen and into a folder on the last. Log out of the worst one, so each visit costs a password. If one app accounts for most of your lost time, take it off the phone and use it on a computer.

Habits respond well to plans made in advance in a "when, then" form, because the plan attaches a new action to the old cue. Three are worth making now, in your own words.

When I put the kettle on, then I leave the phone where it is and look out of the window.

When I find the phone in my hand and can't name the errand, then I put it back in its home.

When I finish an errand, then I lock the phone before I look at anything else.

The third one matters more than it looks. Chapter 1 described the errand that turns into a reach at the moment it's done. The end of an errand is the point where you're most likely to break the rule, because the phone is already open in your hand.

Here's what to expect. For the first couple of weeks your hand will go to your pocket many times a day and find nothing there. That's the habit running without its object, and it isn't a craving. It's mildly uncomfortable. Most people find it fades, and I can't promise you how quickly. Some gaps will feel tedious. You'll break the rule most days, particularly at first, and the next chapter is about that. I can't promise more energy or better concentration, because I don't know your life. What I'd expect is that within a week or two you'll be able to say whether your evenings feel different. That's the measure to go by.

## Hard places and bad weeks

The rule is easy to keep by a kettle. There are places where it's harder, and there are weeks when the whole habit comes back. This chapter takes both.

Start with bed, morning and night. For many people the first reach of the day happens before their feet touch the floor, and the last one ends when the phone slips out of their hand. The phone is there because it's the alarm clock. Buy an alarm clock. They cost a few pounds, and they let the phone spend the night in its home in the hall. This one change removes the two longest reaches of most people's day. If you need to be reachable at night for a parent or a teenager, leave the ringer on and the door open.

Then there's the loo. I'll say only that people managed before, and that the phone's home is not the bathroom.

Public transport and waiting rooms are long gaps, often twenty minutes or more, and the five-minute guideline doesn't cover them. I wouldn't ask anyone to stare at a wall for forty minutes on a train. A long gap is a fair place for a sitting, or better, for something with some length to it. A book, a podcast, an album or a long article can absorb you in a way the loop can't, and chapter 6 explained why that's the better bargain. The thing to avoid is the default, where the phone comes out because you sat down.

With other people, the difficulty is that they're on theirs. You're at a table, your friend picks up her phone, and you've got an empty gap and a social excuse. I'd leave yours where it is. Sometimes that

draws the other person back, and sometimes it doesn't, and either way you've had a minute to look round the room. With children, I'd only point to chapter 7. They notice where your eyes go, and they'll copy it.

If your work comes through the phone, the home still applies, with one change. Decide which channels count as work and urgent, let those make a noise, and treat the rest like everything else. Being on call means you can be reached. It doesn't mean looking every four minutes to see whether you have been.

There's one place where this book's tolerant tone stops, and that's the car. Using a phone while driving isn't a habit to manage. It's dangerous and in most places illegal. The phone goes in the glovebox or the boot before the engine starts.

Now the bad weeks. At some point the reaching will come back in force. The usual occasions are predictable. You're ill and on the sofa for three days, or a big news story breaks and you follow it hour by hour. Holidays do it, when every routine changes. So does a new app that everyone's on, or a stretch of worry or grief, when any distraction is welcome. Afterwards the phone is back in your pocket and the tally is back at eighty.

This isn't a failure, and it doesn't mean the earlier weeks were wasted or that you didn't understand the book. An old habit sits underneath a new one for a long time, and unusual weeks bring it up. What helps is a small response, made soon. Put the phone back in its home tonight, and name the next errand. There's no need to

start again from day one, because nobody was counting days. I'd advise against counting them, since a streak turns one bad Tuesday into a collapse.

It's also worth asking what the bad week was about. If you were ill and bored, the answer is nothing much. If the phone came back because something painful did, that's information. It may have been a useful painkiller for a few days. You can thank it for that and still put it back on the shelf.

That brings me to the point I raised before chapter 1. For some people the reach isn't a habit laid over an ordinary life. It's holding something down. Here are some signs that it would be worth talking to a GP, or referring yourself to a talking therapy service if your area has one.

- When the phone is away, what comes up is dread or a persistent low mood, more than boredom, and it doesn't ease after a couple of weeks.
- You're using the phone to avoid nearly all time alone with your thoughts, and have been for months.
- Your sleep, work or relationships are suffering badly and you can't change the pattern even with the methods in chapter 12.
- The time is going into gambling, or spending you can't afford, or pornography that you've tried and failed to cut back. Those have their own forms of help, and a gambling helpline or your GP is the place to start.
- You have thoughts of harming yourself. That needs urgent help the same day, from your GP, an emergency service or a crisis line.

None of those means you've done anything wrong. They mean the problem is a different size from the one this book was written for, and that better tools exist for it. Keep taking any prescribed medication, and raise any changes with whoever prescribed it.

## The kettle again

Go back to the kitchen in chapter 1. You fill the kettle and switch it on. Your hand goes to your pocket, because it's been doing that for ten years, and the pocket is empty. The phone is on the shelf in the hall with the ringer on.

So you stand there. For the first few seconds there's a small itch, the one chapter 2 called the main payment. It passes. You look out of the window, where next door's cat is on the shed roof again. You notice that your lower back aches and that you've been putting off ringing the dentist. You remember that it's your turn to bring biscuits on Thursday. The kettle clicks off. You make the tea while it's hot.

That's all the change looks like from outside, and nobody would notice it. I've tried throughout this book not to oversell it, and I won't start now. You won't become a different person. The research I've described is mostly small studies that point in one direction without proving it. The method in chapter 12 is sensible, I think, but untested as a whole. Your hand will still go to your pocket for a long while.

What I'm confident of is the narrower claim I began with. An errand and a reach are different acts. The reach promises a rest and mostly doesn't provide one. The empty moments it uses up were worth something. And the habit lives in your routines, which means it's yours to alter, with a shelf in the hall and one short question.

If you do one thing after closing this book, make it the question. The next time the phone is in your hand, ask what you picked it up for. If there's an answer, carry on, and put the phone down when you've finished. If there isn't one, put it down now. Whatever is on it can wait until you next have a reason to look.

## Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor or therapist who knows your situation.

I've kept sources out of the chapters so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes the split between errands and reaches in chapter 1, the list of payments and costs in chapter 2, and the list of what gaps do in chapter 11.

A general caution applies to most of what follows. Research on phone use is young, the devices and apps change faster than the studies, and many samples are small or made up of students. Much of it measures what people do alongside how they feel, which can't show what causes what. I've tried to say in each chapter which kind of study I'm describing.

**Chapter 3.** Kang and Kurtzberg, "Reach for your cell phone at your own risk: the cognitive costs of media choice for breaks", *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 8, 2019, pages 395 to 403. The puzzles were anagrams. On time taken, the phone-break group didn't differ from the no-break group. On anagrams solved, the phone-break group averaged 6.4, the no-break group 5.3, and the paper and computer break groups about 8.1. Dora, van Hooff, Geurts, Kompier and Bijleveld, "Fatigue, boredom and objectively measured smartphone use at work", *Royal Society Open Science* 8, 2021, article 201915. The authors stopped collecting data before reaching their planned sample and changed their analysis plan. They say

the results should be read as exploratory, and that the design can't show cause. The account of why a phone doesn't rest you, as many small acts of taking in and judging, is my interpretation.

**Chapter 4.** Andrews, Ellis, Shaw and Piwek, "Beyond self-report: tools to compare estimated and real-world smartphone use", PLoS One 10, 2015, e0139004. Twenty-nine people were recruited and 23 were compared. The mean was 84.68 uses a day against an estimate of 37.20, and 55 per cent of uses lasted under thirty seconds. Average daily use was about five hours. Leroy, "Why is it so hard to do my work? The challenge of attention residue when switching between work tasks", Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 109, 2009, pages 168 to 181. I confirmed the citation and the outline of the findings but haven't read the paper in full. Mark, Gudith and Klocke, "The cost of interrupted work: more speed and stress", Proceedings of the 2008 conference on human factors in computing systems, pages 107 to 110. Applying both papers to self-made interruptions by phone is my step and not the authors'.

**Chapter 5.** That unpredictable rewards produce more persistent habits than reliable ones comes from laboratory work on learning that goes back to Ferster and Skinner's Schedules of Reinforcement, 1957. Applying it to checking a phone is an interpretation, though a common one. Oulasvirta, Rattenbury, Ma and Raita, "Habits make smartphone use more pervasive", Personal and Ubiquitous Computing 16, 2012, pages 105 to 114. I read a summary of the abstract and not the paper. Kushlev and Dunn, "Checking email less frequently reduces stress", Computers in Human Behavior 43, 2015, pages 220 to 228. Each person did both

weeks. I read summaries and not the paper. Fitz, Kushlev, Jagannathan, Lewis, Paliwal and Ariely, "Batching smartphone notifications can improve well-being", *Computers in Human Behavior* 101, 2019, pages 84 to 94. The split into things that can and can't wait an hour is mine.

**Chapter 6.** Wilson, Reinhard, Westgate, Gilbert, Ellerbeck, Hahn, Brown and Shaked, "Just think: the challenges of the disengaged mind", *Science* 345, 2014, pages 75 to 77. The shock figures leave out people who hadn't said they'd pay to avoid the shock, and one man who pressed the button 190 times. Tam and Inzlicht, "Fast-forward to boredom: how switching behavior on digital media makes people more bored", *Journal of Experimental Psychology General* 153, 2024, pages 2409 to 2426. Six of the seven experiments were registered in advance. The sixth and seventh, with articles and with non-student samples, gave less clear results. The suggestion that filling every gap lowers your tolerance for an empty one is mine, and I know of no study that has measured it.

**Chapter 7.** Verduyn, Lee, Park, Shablack, Orvell, Bayer, Ybarra, Jonides and Kross, "Passive Facebook usage undermines affective well-being: experimental and longitudinal evidence", *Journal of Experimental Psychology General* 144, 2015, pages 480 to 488. 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.

**Chapter 8.** The studies are those listed under chapters 3 and 4. The idea that the hard point of a task is often the point where it's about to move is mine.

**Chapter 9.** Heitmayer and Lahlou, "Why are smartphones disruptive? An empirical study of smartphone use in real-life contexts", *Computers in Human Behavior* 116, 2021, article 106637. Thirty-seven people is a small group, and wearing a camera may change what people do. Panova and Carbonell, "Is smartphone addiction really an addiction?", *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 7, 2018, pages 252 to 259. It is a review and an argument, and other researchers take the opposite view.

**Chapter 10.** Duckworth, Gendler and Gross, "Situational strategies for self-control", *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 11, 2016, pages 35 to 55. It is a review that sets out a model. It didn't test phone habits.

**Chapter 11.** Killingsworth and Gilbert, "A wandering mind is an unhappy mind", *Science* 330, 2010, page 932. Baird, Smallwood, Mrazek, Kam, Franklin and Schooler, "Inspired by distraction: mind wandering facilitates creative incubation", *Psychological Science* 23, 2012, pages 1117 to 1122. The task was thinking of unusual uses for everyday objects. Comparing a kettle gap to the easy-task condition is my analogy and wasn't tested.

**Chapter 12.** Brailovskaia, Delveaux, John, Wicker, Noveski, Kim, Schillack and Margraf, "Finding the sweet spot of smartphone use: reduction or abstinence to increase well-being and healthy lifestyle?! An experimental intervention study", *Journal of Experimental Psychology Applied* 29, 2023, pages 149 to 161. Outcomes were reported by the participants themselves in online surveys. Plans in "when, then" form are from Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to

119. The sitting borrows from the notification batching study under chapter 5. The six-part method as a whole is mine and hasn't been tested as a package by anyone.

**Chapter 13.** The advice on when to seek help is general. In England you can refer yourself to NHS talking therapies without seeing a GP first, and services differ elsewhere.