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## Does 'phone separation anxiety' really exist?

Luisa Dillner/29 August 2017/The Guardian

You know the feeling – you have left your phone at home and feel anxious, as if you have lost your connection to the world. “Nomophobia” (short for no-mobile phobia) affects teenagers and adults alike. You can even do an online test to see if you have it. Last week, researchers from Hong Kong warned that nomophobia is infecting everyone. Their study found that people who use their phones to store, share and access personal memories suffer most. When users were asked to describe how they felt about their phones, words such as “hurt” (neck pain was often reported) and “alone” predicted higher levels of nomophobia.

“The findings of our study suggest that users perceive smartphones as their extended selves and get attached to the devices,” said Dr Kim Ki Joon. “People experience feelings of anxiety and unpleasantness when separated from their phones.” Meanwhile, an American study shows that smartphone separation can lead to an increase in heart rate and blood pressure.

So, can being without your phone really give you separation anxiety? Professor Mark Griffiths, chartered psychologist and director of the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University, says it is what is on the phone that counts – the social networking that creates Fomo (fear of missing out).

“People don’t use their phones to talk to other people – we are talking about an internet-connected device that allows people to deal with lots of aspects of their lives,” says Griffiths. “You would have to surgically remove a phone from a teenager because their whole life is ingrained in this device.”

Griffiths thinks attachment theory, where we develop emotional dependency on the phone because it holds details of our lives, is a small part of nomophobia. For “screenagers”, it is Fomo that creates the most separation anxiety. If they can’t see what’s happening on Snapchat or Instagram, they become panic-stricken about not knowing what’s going on socially. “But they adapt very quickly if you take them on holiday and there’s no internet,” says Griffiths. Deliberately, separating from your phone by turning it off or leaving it at home can reduce dependency and anxiety.

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