

Smartphones and Watches and Tablets, Oh My!
by Rabbi Avi Landa, LCPC

Phantom rings and vibrations are new symptoms currently affecting many people. These happen when a person is walking or sitting and suddenly hears a beep or feels a vibration, checks the phone in his pocket, yet finds no message or notification. People report this phenomenon occurring even on Shabbos, when there is no phone in their pocket at all!* Technology is now not only in our pockets but on our wrists and in our homes. We must be aware of how intrusive these devices can be. This is especially true for our children, who are more vulnerable. As we enter the summer months and our children generally have much more free time on their hands, we must stay aware of how they are keeping themselves busy.

It has become obvious that we must have the proper safeguards (filters, etc.) in place when using smartphones and other such devices. In addition, I often recommend that parents occasionally watch and play *with* their children on the devices accessible to them. This is a great way to better understand what our children are involved with. However, we must be aware not only of the content on such devices but also of how much time we devote to them. Our constant interaction with our phones affects our brains much in the same way as addictive substances. In our modern society, technology provides the go-to place for dealing with boredom. Most people who grew up before the smartphone age, remember plenty of times when they were hanging around – sometimes doing something productive, like learning or reading, and sometimes just spacing out – but not plagued with “boredom.” Having a device at the ready anytime and anywhere, with limitless content and entertainment habituates us to such stimulation. We then develop the need to be highly stimulated more frequently than ever before. Boredom is painful,* but how often and how deeply it affects us is due to the environment we create.

Psychologists are hired to help tech companies produce their apps, social platforms, and games.** They are also hired to help design the basic interface of the phone itself. Ringing, vibrating, notifications, and more are all tweaked to maximize the attention they grab. This is a huge industry, where the more it pulls you in, the more opportunity for the company to make money. Free games/apps will provide many opportunities to purchase an advantage or tool as well as offering advertisements. Thus, the more time the app can manipulate us to spend on it, the better. Can we resist as an individual, a family, a community? The answer lies in one word: self-control.

We all know about the famous marshmallow test – some like it, some don't, but all agree to its basic conclusion – where a child displaying the self-control to delay the immediate gratification of consuming one marshmallow in order to get two, sets the stage for a more successful life in every important area. While some people may have a more naturally strong reservoir of self-control, *everyone* can build it. Much like a muscle in the body, self-control grows through practice and resistance. While simply fighting an urge head-on – telling oneself to “stop it!” – can potentially build the most self-control, most people will lose such a battle. Thus, it is more realistic to find a smaller battle that is winnable, which then sets the stage for continued building of self-control.

Putting a phone away, in a different room, for dinner time can help one to practice self-control. As we practice such a method consistently, we develop a habit, gradually making such a task easier. We could choose to leave our phone in the car when going to minyan or stashing it in the shul locker. We could also actually shut the phone down at various times.

Our children will notice these choices we are making. Such observations plant the seeds that have the best chance of sprouting into genuine internalized growth for the child. This is the best foundation for the child himself to make the best decisions in the future, on his own. Ultimately, all *chinuch* for younger children is about helping that child develop the right habits and the right mindset to make *his own* good and healthy decisions. After all, no child walks down to the *chupa* asking his parents to plan his every move. (At least, he definitely shouldn't!)

Lastly, we are blessed to live in a community that is constantly striving for growth, and always davening for healthy and happy lives. We can look at our neighbors and rebbeim who work to “choose life” every day. Technology is neither good nor bad. It is a magnifying tool. We can, with moderation and balanced usage, choose to magnify life and the good or, *chas veshalom*, the opposite. For ourselves, our children, and our community, let's work hard to choose life.

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*Please email me for articles on this point.

** Please email me or see my website for an article dedicated to understanding the addictive nature of Fortnite and similar games.