Swathi: Hey Samantha, I've got a question for you. Would you say you're addicted to your phone?

Samantha: Not so much now, but I definitely used to be. I do remember being on my year abroad and feeling a bit lonely and just sitting for maybe three to four hours on end, scrolling on short form content. And I think eventually I got out of that, but perhaps only because I try to imagine myself from a third person perspective of, okay, there's that girl sitting in the corner of her room, like, crouched down on the floor in this, like, strained position over her phone. And that just kind of terrified me a bit as an image of myself. So I think that kind of made me get out of that, but that definitely was part of my life at some point.

Swathi: That must have been scary for you.

Samantha: Um, I guess it was just like a strange experience and I was thinking to myself, I'm really wasting my precious time here on my year abroad. Really, what is this? Like, what am I doing? But for yourself?

Swathi: For me, I don't think I was ever addicted to the phone, but I can see myself, my fingers automatically scrolling and then going to Instagram, even when I know I was bored with Instagram 15 minutes ago, I go back to Instagram. I don't know what that happens. I'm not sure if I'm addicted. Yeah, how did it feel that you kind of wasted your time and you just...

Samantha: I mean I think ashamed, but it also felt like a form of self sabotage, like, oh, since I've done this now, I might as well just continue, I mean, it's been one hour, okay, why not two? Like, it's ridiculous, but it was out of a place of boredom, I think, and I didn't really know what to do with myself. Or what to do with the free time that I had. But I do think it's quite a common thing nowadays, once people are in our generation at least. So I guess that's quite relevant to what we're talking about today.

Swathi: Yeah, that's right. And that's why today's episode is all about social media and mental health and understanding the difference between addiction and habit.

Helen: So I head up our teaching and learning within the School of Psychology.

Swathi: That's Dr. Helen Knight, Director of Education from Aberdeen School of Psychology. She is fascinated by addiction.

Helen: I've also got a side research interest in sexual orientation and neurodiversity.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Samantha: Welcome to Beyond Boundaries from the University of Aberdeen. I'm Samantha.

Swathi: And I'm Swathi. This time we are hearing from Helen on when is an addiction, not an addiction

Samantha: and how studying psychology at Aberdeen can prepare you for the future of work.

Helen: If we focus in on the addiction side of things, this all started from when I was doing my own undergraduate degree in psychology. I had a thesis supervisor who worked in the field of addiction and I was so inspired by this individual that I kind of stayed in school and I've never left and I get to keep asking questions about this thing that I'm interested in and finding more stuff about it every day.

So I'm very lucky. One very common phrase that gets chucked around a lot at the moment is this idea that we are addicted to our smartphones. We're addicted to social media. Um, very addicted to Instagram. And I would like to pose a challenge to this line of thought because in my own experience, we're not addicted to our smartphones and we're not addicted to social media.

What we have done and what many people have done is form a very bad habit. But because it's a habit, we can break the habit and having a bad habit doesn't mean that we have an addiction towards something. And I think where I'd quite like to hone in on this is really the key difference between an addiction and a habit.

So addiction is this clinical term. Some of the addiction models, you can apply to smartphone- use and to social media- use, but they don't reach those levels of behaviours where they've had a debilitating effect on people's lives, where people have lost their families, they've lost their jobs, they've lost their health.

You don't get that with social media use. And in a lot of respects, social media use can be very helpful to people. If you've got a bad problem with anxiety, it can help you feel connected with people. Um, if you move away and you're

experiencing high levels of loneliness, it can help you keep in touch with people around you.

It's just that if you form a bad habit of use of it, that's where it can become problematic. And if we form those bad habits and we recognise that we form those bad habits, we can do some quite simple things to break those habits. Anything that just interrupts how we automatically start to use the behaviour.

Um, could it be put your phone into your backpack rather than in your pocket? So you've got a different step to go through. Is it that you turn off notifications on your phone so that if one pops up, you don't have this immediate, Oh, that's activated a habitual response, all of a sudden log on and start using and get lost.

Is it something as simple as setting a use alarm on your phone or something where it alerts you if you've been on for 20 minutes and therefore you get to recognize and consciously note the length of time you've been on something? Something as simple and simplistic as interrupting how you normally engage with a particular behaviour can be enough to break a habit that has formed.

One big key difference between an addiction and a habit is sometimes only small ways you can interrupt use are sufficient to alter a habit, but they won't be sufficient to alter an addiction. And using the term addiction for behaviours that aren't addictive, like social media use, for example, can actually be really problematic for people with addictions, because it can minimize and it can invalidate the experiences of people who have clinical addictive behaviours, wherein they might have lost their family, they might have engaged in use to such an extent that they've got major physical health problems and yet still can't stop using, um, they may have lost their jobs, they may have lost their educational opportunities.

These individuals to suggest that sticking an alarm on your phone or making you log into something is going to alter that behaviour, it's quite insulting, but those simple things can alter habitual behaviours. And we've seen this with a study that was conducted looking at very, very heavy, habitual Facebook users, where when Facebook changed the interface, It was actually the very heavy habitual users whose, uh, engagement with the platform completely dropped off.

And it was because the big change in interface altered how they interacted with that site. It altered the habit that they had formed. It made them have to behave in a different way. And so they just stopped behaving in that way. And it took

them quite a while to get back to using Facebook to even a similar level to they were using before.

But it shows how a relatively small thing, like the change of an interface, had a big impact on behaviour. You can do that with a habit. You cannot do that with an addiction.

Swathi: I think it was really reassuring to know that it was not addiction and it's just a bad habit and if you're aware of your habit, you can kind of rectify or change it.

Samantha: No, yeah, absolutely. And I think I saw myself in what she said about the loneliness and perhaps using social media as like a form of escapism or like a coping mechanism to that.

Yeah, I definitely see that it was a habit, because once I was aware of what I was doing, I understood I didn't like that about me. And then it was more of a choice of, okay, how am I going to go about changing this, this attitude and this habit that I'm not incredibly proud of, whereas addiction is a completely different thing.

It's very true that it's very easy to throw out that word that, oh, I'm addicted to this, I'm addicted to that. I guess words can lose meaning once we, we have like certain associations with them rather than the actual clinical term for it, we completely lose sight of that. So it's very grounding what Helen has just told us about regarding this, because yeah, it's true that it's a habit, not not an addiction, that's two completely different things, and we have more, I would say, more control of, um, and responsibility for our habits rather than an addiction, which would need a lot more professional guidance and help.

Swathi: Yeah, exactly. And that's what Helen says, and she's also skeptical about the idea that social media and phone use is directly causing a rise in mental illness among young people.

And we hear that a lot, don't we? Even my mom says, you know, just get off the phone, do something, be more active. Yeah, that's what I've heard. A lot of people blame social media, but personally for me, I think it has helped me find videos that help me calm or maybe self- care routines. So it's, it's good to know what other people have been taking as a measure to help them.

Helen: Another thing that we do need to look at, if we are taking a look at particularly young people's relationship and engagement with their smartphone

and with social media, are these statistics that you often hear about how there is a growing concern over the mental health of young people. More young people are being diagnosed with anxiety disorders, depression, various other mental health conditions, and this also seems to coincide with this explosion of young people on social media use and an increasing length of time that young people are spending attached to their smartphones.

Therefore, the conclusion that is often drawn is that these smartphones are the cause. Social media in particular is the cause of mental ill health in young people. Social media is causing high levels of social anxiety. It's causing high levels of depression. And partly here, what I want to do, apart from scream into the void, is to throw a word of caution out there on simplifying statistics.

And I'm going to get really nerdy for a second, so you'll have to forgive me. One of the things that you very much develop as a psychologist, you cannot study psychology without studying how we study people, and part of that is about statistics. It's difficult to meet a psychologist who isn't good with numbers in some way, shape or form, because we will have a question that we want to ask.

We'll have to work out, well, what's the best way for me to ask this question? And so we develop some form of study. Is it by pulling some data? Is it by observing people? Is it by getting people to do a task? We then collect that evidence together. I mentioned, uh, earlier on with the, uh, information and data about Facebook users that was collecting that data.

And then you do something with that. And all of this is very, very good research practice. As psychologists, we are also very mindful about what we can say about those numbers. And a crucial thing is not to, uh, conflate correlation, i. e. two things happening at the same time, with causation, i. e. one thing being the direct cause of another thing.

And this is what I think feeds into this big misnomer that we have that social media use is causing mental health problems in young people just because the two things have happened at the same time. Because there's a lot of other stuff that also happens to have happened in the last five, six years. A good example here is that we've had this funny thing, I don't know if people remember this, but about four years ago, we went into global lockdown because there was a pandemic that was floating around the world. We were told we weren't allowed to leave the house. You were only allowed out for one hour. If you left the house for more than one hour, your neighbours could tell on you, you had to wear masks, you weren't allowed within, oh, is it two metres of another person?

This was a huge collective trauma that we all went through. And indeed, young people also went through this collective trauma. Students who are about to study at university would be around about 14 years old when this happened. It's no surprise that if we went through a generational collective trauma, at a time when young people's brains were still developing and your brain doesn't stop fully developing until you're round about the age of 25.

So a 14 year old's brain is very much in that developmental stage. That may or may not have had an effect on mental health, and I would argue very strongly that collective trauma is badly connected with mental health. It just so happens that at the same time, people are using their smartphones and social media has been a thing that we've been engaged in for quite a long length of time, it's not a new thing. And also if all of a sudden you're not allowed to see your friends every day because you're not allowed to go into school, you're not allowed into those buildings, you're not allowed to leave the house. Then of course people are going to use social media and their smartphone to keep in touch with the people that they're then not allowed to see in person.

It's the only way to get through this massive alteration in schooling is to stay connected to the people that you've got in your life. And if the way that you do that because of an additional circumstance is virtually, it can be a good thing that we have social media. So I would. argue strongly against the notion that social media is causing bad mental health in young people and instead issue a massive word of caution that we need to look at other things that have been happening in the world and what impact they may have had on both of the above.

And as psychologists, this is the kind of stuff that we have to do.

Swathi: And when we were discussing about You know, the older generation kind of blame the younger generation for using social media. But personally, I think it's funny because I feel like my mom and dad uses phone more than me and I made a family group named family phone because everyone was on phone and they were not giving me attention.

So I don't know if that's fair that we get to hear young people use more social media and that's the cause of mental illness. And really, that's strange

Samantha: for me. I guess it's quite a relief to know that it's not necessarily one thing that has caused, like, mental health issues amongst the population. And the fact that she used the idea of collective trauma is also interesting.

Swathi: It was interesting when she said correlation and causation, because if you don't understand the difference, you can say social media is the cause of it rather than correlation. So I think that was a good point by Helen. Especially with pandemic, I think social media helped us going like we used to have baking videos and we used to do a lot of things because of social media.

And I think that was kind of helpful.

Helen: All of what I've spoken about so far in this podcast. It does all link back to both my training as a psychologist and the training that every budding psychologist will have to do, they'll be required to do, but also how we nurture this at the University of Aberdeen. We can't take anything for granted.

We have to think critically. And thinking critically, I do want to stress, does not just mean thinking of something and then going, nope, that's wrong. Thinking critically is all about what other explanation is there? Is this only half of one whole of a story? Is this only a small portion of the bigger picture?

If it is, what is the rest of the picture and how does that all fit together? If I pull this slightly back towards the field of addiction, for example, it's too simplistic for me to say we learn our addictive behaviours. There's definitely an element of learning in addiction. There's an element of learning in the formation of habits where we will re engage in a behaviour if we get rewarded for it, and should stop if we're punished.

But it's not as simple as that. With addiction, there's also genetics that you have to take into account. There's also your childhood development that you have to take into account. There's how we process and think of the world. There's our gender. There's our age. All of these things are tiny parts of one wider picture.

And in psychology, what we'll get you to do at the University of Aberdeen is examine what that small bit is, but then take a really good look at how that fits into the bigger picture. How does smartphone use fit into how society is at the moment? What that might have caused in terms of emotional responses or trauma, how that might fit into a family unit, how that then might, you know, um, overlap over towards what your brain has done, your biological development, and then how that then interacts with what we have going on at this moment, at this time.

All of these things are very important to look at, but they can't and none of them are looked at individually and in isolation. If you think about how any one person or any one group acts in the world around us today, it's very complex.

And so we will train you to look at that complexity, we'll train you to not just take for rote anything that you read, always have that idea of, but what is this not saying?

What have they not looked at? What has maybe been ignored? We'll train you to be the person that thinks, yes, but there's this other thing that you haven't thought of and that this article didn't mention. And what could the biases be in people who write things? And sometimes, you know, they're completely innocent biases.

They're just taken from our own perspective and our own lived experiences. But we also can't ignore the fact that they're there. They exist. So how do we spot them? If we have them and we have spotted them, what can we do about them? And that's all part of studying psychology at the University of Aberdeen.

So in my role as the Director of Education in the School of Psychology, one of the best bits about my job Is that, uh, essentially the School of Psychology is a building full of absolute nerds who fell in love with a subject and haven't been able to leave it. And we get to teach people about the thing that we love and watch students become inspired by and passionate about this same thing.

It's one of the best feelings in the world. And I've had multiple students reach out to me for references for jobs where they now want to go and work in addiction services. The fact that the subject and the teaching of this content has inspired people to then want to do something with that in their own personal lives.

We hopefully inspire students, but our students do more than inspire us back.

Samantha: That's so cute. I don't know, it's so genuine and so sweet. I guess that's what teaching and learning is all about. It's about that exchange and knowing that your teacher or your lecturer is completely passionate and in love with what they're doing.

And then that will transmit into you being able to reflect that back to them.

Swathi: Yeah. My tutors are passionate about the subject and I can really sense that from them. And that kind of motivates us to do more in the field.

Samantha: You do definitely feel supported whether you're having difficulties and you need support in understanding certain material or like whether it's like

asking for extensions and teachers are so like accommodating towards um, understanding whatever's going on in your personal life.

But then also if there's great opportunities they also celebrate that with you and everyone kind of works together to cultivate the general collective experience of education in the university.

Swathi: I, I think my experience is also kind of similar, where I did feel welcomed, especially as an international student. It was difficult for me to just fit into the class, and I think having this support and understanding and passionate tutors were really, really beneficial for me. I am where I am in the field because of them.

Samantha: I think we have just enough time for one last point from Helen.

Helen: So if you've gotten to the end of this podcast and you're not fed up of hearing my dulcet tones yet, you might have recognised or realized that I haven't actually told you how to help your potentially bad social media habit or your smartphone habit.

So I'll, I'll end with some, uh, top tips you might want to call them. The first and most important thing is, find a way to break your habit. If there is a time or a day where you find that you somehow automatically pick up your phone and start scrolling for no real reason, is there a way that you can interrupt that process from happening?

One really simple thing could be to do something like take the notifications off your phone. If a notification pops up and that is your trigger to open up your phone, log into a social media app, and then once you've logged into it, you can't log back out of it. So you keep on scrolling and scrolling and scrolling.

First of all, don't beat yourself up about this. Remember that social media companies have designed their sites to make you do this. It's to encourage people to do this. So if you do find yourself endlessly scrolling It's not something that you should be embarrassed about or feel guilty about or beat yourself up about.

The sites are designed in this way. There's a reason for, I'm one of those people that likes to watch animals, um, doing daft things like cats walking up onto a set of shelves and knocking all the stuff down. Um, dogs getting reunited with their owners. I'm a sucker for these types of little video clips.

But there's a reason why my Instagram feed doesn't put cat video, cat video, cat video, cat video. There's a cat video, and then there's a few posts of drivel, and then I might get a dog video. And then I've got another couple of posts of stuff that, you know, random celebrity I've never heard of you, scroll, scroll, ooh, another cat video.

When you're not quite sure when the next reward is coming, it makes you want to scroll even more. So don't beat yourself up about it. Recognise, first of all, that the sites have done this. They've done this for a reason. It taps into some really powerful ways of which humans learn, but then do something to interrupt it.

Take the notifications off your phone to stop you from going on there in the first place. That can already break a habit. If you tend to scroll through social media when you're waiting at a bus stop, or if you are sitting on the bus or sitting on the train home, is there something else that you could do?

Once you've finished using Instagram, properly log out. So it's not to say that you can't go back on, but if you want to use it again, you'll have to go into your phone and log it back into that particular site. It's an extra step of behaviour, but it could be enough to just break that habit. Is it that you should have your phone in your bag rather than in your pocket so that you've got more of an effort to pull your bag around, open the zipper, get it out, rather than just reaching your hand into your pocket and then suddenly scrolling again?

So what other things can you do that just interrupt that process of picking up your phone, logging on, and scrolling? If you can think of ways that you can do that really simple, but often highly effective routes to interrupting those habits and hopefully forming some new healthier habits without beating yourself up in the process.

Swathi: I think that's a really interesting point. Like, you know, just if you can interrupt the habit and I've never thought about keeping my phone in the bag. Maybe I can give that a go and see if that works.

Samantha: Just personally, I don't think it would work for me because I think I just generally have a bad relationship with boredom and I would do anything to escape the feeling that boredom gives me.

So it's more me trying to understand how I can improve that relationship with boredom or how I can work with it rather than against it. Like I've already

removed the things that I'm drawn to, so with Instagram I, I went through a phase of temporarily deactivating the account, so I did that for a few times.

But it's true that I like kind of transferred that time to a different platform simply. So that problem was still there, it was more just like an internal thing. journey that I had to and still am trying to understand.

Swathi: Sounds like you're still trying to find a way out of it.

Samantha: It's kind of going back to the days before phones or trying to remember what I did when I was a child and kind of getting back into different hobbies instead of resorting to kind of an easier way of entertaining myself.

Swathi: I think it was really interesting that when she mentioned about interrupting the process from happening, I have switched off my phone. notifications of Instagram and that's really helped me to not go back to it. So I think that's one good tip. And I'm also planning to keep my phone in my bag rather than my pocket, just to see if that works.

Samantha: Well, thank you to Dr. Helen Knight for speaking to us about her research and what studying psychology at the University of Aberdeen looks like.

Swathi: So if you want to join the Boundary Breakers, you can come to one of our open days and see our historic campus.

Samantha: And you can also download our digital prospectus at www. abdn. ac. uk.

Swathi: And to hear more from us, check out the rest of the podcast.

Each episode discusses the groundbreaking research from one of Aberdeen's academics.