**5 Key Ideas from Psychology on Why You Can’t Put Down Your Phone**

* **Variable Interval Reinforcement**: One of B.F. Skinner’s methods of getting rats and pigeons to learn (also works with humans). You never know when you’ll get a reward. You don’t necessarily have to do anything (you could just stand around and wait) but eventually you’ll get a reward. This happens with our phones. Eventually you’ll get pinged and you’ll check your phone. Sometimes the ping will signal a reward so you’ll check your phone again.
* **Variable Ratio Reinforcement**: the stronger way to get you to repeatedly do something is to reward you not every time you do something, but after you do the behavior an uncertain number of times. Gambling is the best example. You have to keep putting coins into a slot machine – but you never know when you might win. For our phones: you have to do something – like create a text or upload an image or a video – and you never know when exactly you’ll get rewarded (such as a friend seeing it, liking it or telling you how great it is).
* **The Teenage Brain** is especially responsive to rewards. The neurotransmitter dopamine that is released when you experience a reward (such as a message from a friend or watching a funny video) is really powerful. Teens get a more powerful sense of pleasure from these rewards than adults do. Thankfully, this means that as we get older we’ll find our phones less compelling.
* **The Teenage Years: a Time of Exploration**: according to Erik Erikson, teens are in the “Identity vs. Role Confusion stage and they are actively trying to figure out who they are and where they fit in. They are also naturally afraid of missing out on social events (FOMO). Their cell phone and the internet in general hold this kind of important information for them.
* **Mystery**: all of us are drawn in by the unknown and the incomplete. We naturally feel a strong need to resolve mysteries and to solve puzzles. Very often we’re drawn to our phones because of headlines like “You’ll never believe what happens next…”. For teens, it’s irresistible.

## One Reason Why Parents Are Very Concerned

**Terror Management theory** – parents often are afraid to see the world they grew up in fade away. It reminds us that we’re getting older. But are we going to Stagnate – as Erik Erickson would say – or Generate?

**What Can Parents Do?**

* **Create Rules around phone use** – when phones can and cannot be used. It’s preferable that you do this rule making along with your teen so that you both feel a sense of ownership around the rules.
* It’s best not to use phones before bedtime – teens need the sleep
* If you decide to threaten to turn off your teen’s phone because of bad behavior (**Skinner would call this negative punishment**), make sure to follow through. Show your team that you will indeed turn off the phone