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A Cellphone Hang-Up

By Steven Hendlin, Ph.D.

Don't get me wrong. I'll be the first to admit that cellphones are a wonderful convenience. Beyond keeping us in touch in myriad important and mundane ways, they can be a great distraction. You know what I'm talking about, right?

Kids graduate from playing with Game Boys to playing games online on their phone, peering into the miniature screen. They sit around, downloading sports scores from the Internet, keeping themselves insulated from the dreaded state of boredom.

Teenagers send instant text messages to one another, giving their opinion of the latest movie or voting for the hottest teen singing "idol" of their choice. They buy color-coordinated shells for their phones to match the clothes they wear. Have you seen those adult women who love to match their phone shell to their tennis shoes? Talk about color-coordinated!

And let's not forget the latest craze - holding a walkie-talkie a foot from your face and having an instantaneous conversation across the country with one push of a button. Who wants to live without these high-tech distractions, which keep everyone occupied when they have nothing better to do?

I do, that's who.

The price we pay for the great convenience of cellphones is noise pollution. It's not the kind of pollution we usually think of. It's not loud and overwhelming like the jets taking off from the airport. No, it's more insidious and chronic. We are held captive, forced to listen to everyone's personal business, which we can't escape and couldn't care less about.

Like it or not, cellphones have turned what used to be private conversations into everyday, public babble. When we used to hear someone muttering to himself, we thought he was probably deranged. Now we are conditioned to know he's just talking on the phone.

Whether I want to, I'm forced to have to listen to you when you're in line ordering a bagel, when you're trying on clothes in a stall at Bloomingdales, sitting in a restaurant while I'm trying to have a peaceful meal, or when I'm trying to concentrate on my golf swing on the driving range when you happen to get a call from your boss. Let me tell you, I don't want to hear it!

And do these conspicuous cellphone-talkers care about showing courtesy when they get these calls? Of course not. They receive a call, and they are going to take it, whether it happens to interrupt my concentration and my enjoyment of being in my own personal world.

Before cellphones, we could be in public but still be with our own thoughts. I wasn't forced to listen to endless blabbing about absolutely nothing just because someone didn't want to be forced to confront his own thoughts and feelings of isolation. But now, everything is different. Some people wear cellphones like a gun on the hip, in a silly-looking little holster. And when it starts ringing, they draw it as fast as Jesse James drew his six-shooter.

I've had patients who, while consulting me, jumped every time their phone went off. They felt so dependent on their phones, they refused to turn them off even during a psychotherapy session. At least I've been able to convince them to turn down the volume so as not to create a startled reaction every time it rings.

All I'm really saying is give peace a chance. See what happens when you turn the thing off for a few hours. And please, when you get the message, hang up the phone.