



The 7-Day **Intention** Experiment

A research-informed week to notice
when your time slips — without
deleting any apps.

TIME BY CHOICE, NOT BY DEFAULT

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BEFORE YOU START

Sometimes scrolling starts before a choice does.

THE AIM

To help you notice when you're using your phone on purpose, and when you're not — not to cut screen time, but to make more of it something you chose.

Seven days, one page each. Day 1 is for watching, not changing. Days 2 through 6 look at one pattern each. Day 7 puts it together.

Most days include a small if-then plan — a well-studied way to follow through on an intention, though each version here is still something to test for yourself.

Days 1 through 6 ask for one short observation — moment, intention, what happened, what changed — kept wherever you'll write it. It should take under a minute. **We never see it.** Miss a day? Pick up where you left off.

ONE NUMBER, FIRST

Before day one: the number that keeps this experiment honest.

In one large study across three adolescent datasets, digital technology use was only weakly associated with wellbeing — accounting for at most **0.4%** of the variation.



at most 0.4% of the variation · full track = 100%

That doesn't mean digital experiences don't matter, and it doesn't show that how someone uses a phone matters more than how long they use it. It shows total use alone left almost all of the variation unexplained.

That's one reason this experiment asks about moments, not just hours.

Source: Orben & Przybylski (2019)

DAY 01

Notice, don't fix

Sometimes you stay without making a new decision.

Today isn't for changing anything. It's for watching one moment happen — the way you'd watch weather, not judge it.

At some point today, you may reach for your phone, open an app, or keep going past where you meant to stop. If it happens, write down four things:

Moment

What was happening?

I meant to

What had I intended to do?

What happened

What did I do next?

What changed or got pushed aside

If anything?

One moment is enough, under a minute. Nothing stood out today? Write that — it counts too.

Automatic Checking

Nobody texted you. You checked anyway.

Researchers describe checking habits: brief, repeated looks at content that changes. In a controlled field experiment, quick access to new information reinforced checking behavior.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

It describes a pattern, not a verdict. The same research doesn't say these checks are harmful, or how much of your day they add up to.

TODAY'S EXPERIMENT

"If I notice I've opened my phone without a reason, I name what I'm there for."

WHAT TO NOTICE

Whether a reason comes easily — and what it is.

Log it — moment, meant to, happened, changed. Nothing today? Write that.

DAY 03

Time Drift

11:02_{PM} ----- 12:37_{AM}

opened

looked up

You meant to stop. You didn't notice the time in between.

People aren't especially accurate at estimating their own digital media use. Self-reports and logged use only moderately match.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

That doesn't tell you whether you personally overestimate or underestimate.

TODAY'S EXPERIMENT

"When I open an app, I note the time. When I decide to leave, I estimate how long I was there — before checking the clock again."

WHAT TO NOTICE

Whether your estimate was shorter, longer, or close to the actual duration.

Log it — app, your estimate, the actual duration. Nothing today? Write that.

Escape & Avoidance

Why does your phone get interesting exactly when the work gets hard?

Sometimes the phone isn't the goal — it's the exit. One model frames some internet use as compensatory coping. More recent work links stronger boredom dislike to more smartphone use.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

That doesn't establish cause and effect, and it doesn't mean every mid-task scroll is avoidance.

TODAY'S EXPERIMENT

“If I notice I've started scrolling mid-task, I name what was happening right before — then decide.”

WHAT TO NOTICE

Whether the moment followed boredom, discomfort, or something else.

Log it — moment, meant to, happened, changed. Nothing today? Write that.

Interrupted Intentions

You sit down to do one thing and end up scrolling instead.

This shows up at bedtime — staying up later than you meant to, with nothing forcing it. It also happens mid-task, when attention shifts to social media instead.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Both have been documented in self-report research, which describes the pattern but doesn't establish that phone use caused it.

TODAY'S EXPERIMENT

“If I notice I'm on my phone instead of what I meant to do, I name that intention — then decide.”

WHAT TO NOTICE

What got pushed aside, if anything.

Log it — moment, meant to, happened, changed. Nothing today? Write that.

Social Comparison

Sometimes you close the app feeling behind.

Social comparison isn't new. Psychologists have studied it since the 1950s. A recent meta-analysis looked at upward comparison online.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Across 54 samples, upward comparison on social media was linked, on average, to poorer psychological outcomes. The size varied a lot — this isn't a universal pattern.

TODAY'S EXPERIMENT

“When a post changes how I feel, I name the specific thing I just compared myself to.”

WHAT TO NOTICE

What changed in how you saw your own life, if anything.

Log it — moment, meant to, happened, changed. Nothing today? Write that.

What the week showed

The goal was never necessarily less screen time. It was noticing the gap between what you meant to do and what happened.

Look back over the observations you collected this week. There's no score to calculate — just questions.

Which moment was easiest to recognize?

Did the same situation come up more than once?

What got displaced the most?

Which pattern barely showed up?

Was there anything you expected to see, and didn't?

“Nothing showed up consistently enough to call it a pattern” is a real answer — that tells you something too.

Over the week, you looked at five patterns one at a time. In real life they overlap, and seven days can't say which matter most. That's what one week can show — and what it can't.

CORRECTIONS

Found something we got wrong?

If we've overstated a finding or misread a study, tell us:

corrections@timebychoice.com. When a correction is warranted, we make it public.

MORE ON THE EVIDENCE

For fuller notes on what these studies show — and what they don't — visit

timebychoice.com/research.

WHAT THIS IS NOT

This is a reflection tool, not medical, psychological, or therapeutic advice, diagnosis, or treatment, and it isn't a clinical or diagnostic instrument. If you're concerned about your mental health or wellbeing, please talk to a qualified professional.

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