

## EDITOR'S PAGE

## The Tyranny of the Cell Phone

I had just risen to speak, the audience was quiet, and my first slide was about to appear, when my cell phone started to ring. This immediately induced a laugh from the audience as I fumbled to get the phone out of my pocket and quiet it. In fact, so ingrained had the importance of the phone become that I instinctively peeked to identify the caller as I turned it off. As I apologized to the audience I again wondered how wireless communication and the Internet had come to play such an important, and often controlling, part of my life.

The first cellular telephone I ever owned was the size of a fat laptop computer. It had a battery life of approximately 1 hour so that you could not stray too far from a power source. However, it provided a sense of enormous freedom in that I could make or receive a call from wherever I was located, assuming of course that I was within range of the carrier. While on-call for the hospital, I could now go to places that had not been possible without wireless communications. Just the ability to make or receive a call while in my car was an amazing experience and advantage. Although I had to carry the instrument with me in a small case, I felt reachable and connected in a way that I had never felt before.

As the size of handsets decreased and the service areas increased, cell phones became even more convenient and enabling. You could put one in your pocket or on your belt and have it with you at all times in a relatively inconspicuous manner. Carrying a cell phone quickly became as natural and habitual as carrying my wallet and keys, or putting on a watch. I noticed that I often used the wireless device even when a landline was available, and that the ease and convenience of use resulted in my spending an increasing amount of time talking on the telephone. Comments about how we ever lived without these devices became even more common.

The next lifestyle changing event was the development of the smart phone. Now, I could not only carry my phone, calendar, and contact list, but also access the Internet. Suddenly I could read my e-mails and send and receive text messages wherever my cell phone was in range of service. I could almost instantaneously surf the web, access Google, view CNN, or have most of the communication capabilities of my computer. I remember relishing the thought that I would never have to waste any significant time again; if I found myself waiting for an appointment or was in any way inactive, I could just fire up my smart phone and get online. The opportunity to be productive was unlimited.

As the years have gone by my smart phone has gradually crept into a more and more prominent place in my daily activities. Initially I received relatively few calls, since only my family and close friends had my cell phone number. However, I often spent time in multiple locations, and the convenience of being reachable anywhere led me to more frequently give out the number. In fact, colleagues and acquaintances often asked for it. Of course, they also obtained it whenever I called them on the cell, which I did often since it was so convenient to just take the receiver from my belt. In addition, contact



**Anthony N. DeMaria, MD**

*Editor-in-Chief, Journal of the American College of Cardiology*

*To a certain degree, the smart phone has gone from making life more effortless, to making it more stressful.*

forms increasingly requested my cell phone number as wireless communication became more common. And so hearing the ringtone of my phone became an ever more common experience. Soon I began to receive calls when I was in the middle of some other activity, or at very inopportune times. While I could prevent disturbing others by changing the musical signal to vibration mode, I remained aware that someone was trying to speak to me, which caused at least a transient subconscious distraction.

Similarly, the ability to access the Internet has progressively encroached on my daily life. At first I used my cell phone to read e-mails or surf the web only on occasions when I anticipated being inactive for 10 minutes or more, such as waiting to board an airplane. Gradually I began to look at the phone during shorter intervals, such as waiting for conferences to begin. This behavior has recently increased to the point that I reach for the smart phone almost immediately when I am not engaged, such as waiting for an elevator. In fact, I sometimes interrupt other endeavors, such as attending lectures, by taking a quick peek at the phone's screen. Not uncommonly I will check for e-mails while walking from one building to another, taking care not to run into others reading their e-mails and walking in the opposite direction. Clearly the role of the smart phone in my life has gotten a bit out of hand.

The prominence of my cell phone cannot be divorced from the growth of my e-mails. It is not unheard of for me to receive upwards of 100 e-mails per day, many requiring substantial responses. I suspect that the availability of e-mail had resulted in communications between individuals that might not have occurred before. Prior to the Internet, one considered how pressing an issue was prior to calling or mailing a letter. Now, the ease of sending an e-mail eliminates much of this concern. In addition, of course, is the ease with which advertisements and other spam can be transmitted. Given several recent publications on this topic, it is clear that this is a growing issue for nearly everyone. So, most of us are regularly confronted with the task of sifting through long lists of e-mails to identify those that are really important and in need of rapid response. It is not surprising, therefore, that

we are (or at least I am) quick to examine the status of new e-mails, especially given the ready access on a cell phone.

And so it is that I am writing this essay about feeling captive to my cell phone. However, I am working very hard to blunt the role it has come to play in my routine behavior. The phone is now usually on vibrate mode, although this does not completely eliminate the compulsion to see who is trying to contact me. I am also struggling to overcome the reflex reach for the phone the minute I am not fully engaged in some activity. While the reaching has not yet been conquered, I have managed to frequently interrupt it after touching the phone so that it does not get removed from my pocket or holster, much less opened and viewed. I am also in the process of establishing blocks of time dedicated to responding to phone calls and e-mails. This is likely to lead to "telephone tag," since experience has taught me that the rate of contacting those I am calling is less than 50%, unless, of course, I try them on their cell phone.

And so, the wireless communication and cell phones that started out to be such wonderful and liberating developments have now, in some sense, become the source of problems. The pendulum has over swung, and at least for me, has gone from making me more easily reachable to too easily reachable. The e-mails that facilitated communication are now bogging it down. To a certain degree, the smart phone has gone from making life more effortless, to making it more stressful. I am, however, taking steps to overcome this problem, some of which are already yielding improvements. Hopefully, if everyone works together in the future we can extract the best from smart phones, while limiting their potential for tyranny.

---

**Address correspondence to:**

Dr. Anthony N. DeMaria  
Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*  
3655 Nobel Drive, Suite 630  
San Diego, California 92112  
E-mail: [ademaria@acc.org](mailto:ademaria@acc.org)