Why You Can't Put Your Phone Down

(It's Not Just You)

By Felicia Burgess, MS, BCBA, LABA

You pick up your phone to check the weather. Twenty minutes later you're watching a stranger restore a rusty frying pan, and you still don't know if it's going to rain.

It's tempting to call that a willpower problem. It isn't. Your phone is running some of the most reliable principles in behavior science, and it's running them on you all day long. Once you can see how it works, you can start using the same science to take some control back.

The slot machine in your pocket

In ABA, a **schedule of reinforcement** describes how often a behavior pays off. Some behaviors pay off every time, like flipping a light switch. Others pay off only some of the time, and you never know which time it'll be. That second kind is called a **variable ratio schedule**, and it's the same one slot machines use.

Checking your phone works the same way. Most of the time there's nothing new. But every so often there's a text from someone you love, a funny video, or a lot of likes on your post. You can't predict which check will pay off, so you keep checking.

Variable ratio schedules produce fast, steady behavior that's very hard to stop. That isn't a flaw in you. It's one of the most consistent findings in the science of behavior, in people and in animals alike.

The buzz that pulls you back

The things that happen right before a behavior are called **antecedents**. Notifications are antecedents engineered to work. A buzz, a sound, or a little red badge signals that something might be waiting for you, and your hand is on the phone before you've decided anything.

You don't even need the notification itself. Boredom, a pause in conversation, waiting in line, or sitting down on the couch can all become cues, simply because you've picked up your phone in those moments so many times before.

Why there's no good place to stop

Most activities have a natural ending. A chapter ends, an episode ends, the dishes are done. Those endings are cues to stop. Infinite scroll and autoplay take them away on purpose. There's always one more post, so the decision to stop is left entirely to you, usually at the moment you're least likely to make it.

Why cutting back feels worse before it feels better

When a behavior that used to pay off suddenly stops paying off, it doesn't fade quietly. It usually gets stronger first. Behavior analysts call this an **extinction burst**. Think of pressing an elevator button over and over when the elevator doesn't come.

If you delete an app and then catch yourself reaching for it ten times a day, or opening the spot on your home screen where it used to be, that's an extinction burst. It's a sign the change is working, not a sign you've failed. Stick with it and the urge usually drops off.

How to use the science on purpose

You can't out-willpower a reinforcement schedule. But you can change the environment around it. Pick one or two of these:

Change the antecedents. Turn off every notification that isn't from a real person. Charge your phone outside the bedroom. Fewer cues means fewer automatic pickups.

Make it a little harder. Move your most-scrolled apps off the home screen, or log out so you have to sign back in. Small hurdles, which behavior analysts call **response effort**, cut down on mindless checking.

Add a stopping point back in. Set a timer before you open a scrolling app, or turn off autoplay. Give yourself the ending the app took away.

Reinforce what you'd rather do. Keep a book, a puzzle, or a sketchpad where your phone usually sits. Notice and enjoy the moments you choose something else. The goal isn't just less phone. It's more of something you value.

The bigger point

The same science that keeps you scrolling is the science BCBAs use to help people build skills, break habits, and live fuller lives. It isn't magic and it isn't manipulation by itself. It's just how behavior works. Once you can see it, you get a say in how it's used on you.

That's what ABA is really about: understanding why we do what we do, so we can change it on purpose.

Want the deep dive? Read “Schedules of Reinforcement: The Complete Study Guide” and more free articles at ababreakdown.com.

This article is for educational purposes and does not constitute clinical advice. Content aligns with the BACB Ethics Code. ABA Breakdown is independent and is not affiliated with or endorsed by the BACB.