

LEVEL A2

Why Can't We Stop Checking Our Phones?

What a Buzz Does to Your Brain

Olivia tries a one-week experiment with her phone. She and Sean talk about monkeys, pigeons and goldfish, and why we check our phones so often.

Key words

- experiment
- notification
- drawer
- enemy
- buzz
- signal
- at random
- addictive
- focus
- restless
- silent
- cheat

In this workbook

Key words	2
Full transcript	3
Did you understand?	8
Who said it?	8
Code breaker	9
Your turn	9
Answer key	10

How to use it

1

Listen to the episode on YouTube.

2

Read the transcript and learn the key words.

3

Do the activities, then check the answer key.

Includes the full transcript, key words, activities and answers

Listen to the episode on the Aprendos YouTube channel

Key words

These words appear in the episode.

Key words	Meaning	Example
experiment <i>noun</i>	A test that you do to learn something new.	<i>In science class, we did an experiment with ice and salt.</i>
notification <i>noun</i>	A short message on your phone. It tells you that something new happened.	<i>I get a notification every time my brother posts a photo.</i>
drawer <i>noun</i>	A small box in a table or cupboard. You pull it out to open it.	<i>My socks are in the top drawer, next to my old watch.</i>
enemy <i>noun</i>	A person or thing that is against you and makes your life hard.	<i>In the film, the two brothers become enemies after a big fight.</i>
buzz <i>noun, verb</i>	A short, low sound, like the sound of a bee or a phone.	<i>I heard a buzz and looked for my phone under the sofa.</i>
signal <i>noun</i>	A sound or a light that tells you something.	<i>When the light turns green, that's the signal to go.</i>
at random <i>phrase</i>	With no plan or order, so you can't know what comes next.	<i>The teacher chose three students at random to read their stories.</i>
addictive <i>adjective</i>	So nice or exciting that it is very hard to stop.	<i>This game is very addictive. I played it until two in the morning.</i>
focus <i>noun</i>	When you think about one thing for a long time.	<i>I need a lot of focus for my maths homework, so I study in the library.</i>
restless <i>adjective</i>	Unable to stay calm or sit still.	<i>The children got restless on the long car trip to their grandmother's house.</i>
silent <i>adjective</i>	With no sound at all.	<i>Please make your phone silent before the film starts.</i>
cheat <i>verb</i>	To break the rules to get what you want.	<i>My little brother cheated in the card game. He looked at my cards!</i>

Full transcript

Why Can't We Stop Checking Our Phones?: What a Buzz Does to Your Brain

- OLIVIA** Day one, I picked up my phone, and the screen was gray.
- SEAN** Gray?
- OLIVIA** Gray. No colors and no new messages. And I still picked it up.
- SEAN** How many times?
- OLIVIA** Forty-one times before lunch. I counted.
- SEAN** Forty-one times, for a gray screen?
- OLIVIA** For a gray screen.
- SEAN** This is Aprendos English, level A2. I'm Sean.
- OLIVIA** And I'm Olivia.
- SEAN** So, Olivia, why was your phone gray?
- OLIVIA** Last month I did an experiment. One week, three new rules for my phone.
- SEAN** Why?
- OLIVIA** My phone sent me a report. Five hours a day.
- SEAN** Five hours? That's a part-time job.
- OLIVIA** Well, it is my job, a little. I'm a social media consultant.
- SEAN** So you help companies keep folks on their phones.
- OLIVIA** I help companies talk to people. That's different.
- SEAN** Is it?
- OLIVIA** A bit different. Okay, quick quiz. How many times a day does an American check their phone?
- SEAN** Twenty?
- OLIVIA** Higher.
- SEAN** Fifty?
- OLIVIA** One hundred and eighty-six.
- SEAN** One hundred and eighty-six? Every day?
- OLIVIA** That's from a 2025 survey by the website Reviews.org. They asked about a thousand adults.
- SEAN** But that's once every five minutes...
- OLIVIA** ...when you're awake, yes. And most people check it in the first ten minutes of the day.
- SEAN** Not me. I check my phone maybe ten times a day.
- OLIVIA** Ten times. Sure, Sean.
- SEAN** It's true! I'm British, and we're very calm people.
- OLIVIA** Okay. Rule one, I turned off almost all my notifications. Only calls and messages from my family came in.
- SEAN** And rule two was the gray screen.
- OLIVIA** Yes, phones have a black and white setting. And rule three, my phone went in a kitchen drawer during work.

- SEAN A drawer. Very brave.
- OLIVIA You laugh, but that drawer was my enemy all week.
- SEAN So why did you pick it up forty-one times?
- OLIVIA I didn't know! My hand just did it. So that night, I started to read about the brain.
- SEAN Let me guess. Dopamine.
- OLIVIA Dopamine. What do you know about it?
- SEAN It's the happy chemical, isn't it? A message comes, and you feel good.
- OLIVIA I thought that too. But the true story starts with monkeys and juice.
- SEAN Of course it does.
- OLIVIA In the early 1990s, a scientist in Switzerland, Wolfram Schultz, gave monkeys juice. And he watched their dopamine cells.
- SEAN And the cells got excited about the juice.
- OLIVIA At first, yes. Then he turned on a light before the juice. The monkeys learned the pattern. Light, then juice.
- SEAN So the dopamine came with the juice...
- OLIVIA ...no, it moved to the light. And then the juice came, and the cells almost did nothing.
- SEAN Wait. So the brain likes the signal more than the prize?
- OLIVIA In a way, yes. Dopamine is more about expecting. And surprise is very important.
- SEAN So the buzz from my phone is the light.
- OLIVIA The buzz is the light! And my phone buzzes all day long.
- SEAN Okay, I know the next part. It's an old experiment from the 1950s, with pigeons.
- OLIVIA Monkeys, and now pigeons. This episode is a zoo.
- SEAN An American psychologist, B. F. Skinner, put pigeons in a box. A pigeon pecked a small button, and food came out.
- OLIVIA Every time?
- SEAN For some pigeons, yes. For others, food came at random. Guess which pigeons pecked more.
- OLIVIA The every-time pigeons. They know the food is coming.
- SEAN No, the random pigeons. They pecked and pecked, because maybe the next peck was the lucky one.
- OLIVIA Oh no. That's a slot machine.
- SEAN Skinner said the same thing about gambling. And the random pigeons kept pecking after the food stopped...
- OLIVIA ...just like me in front of a gray screen.
- SEAN Just like you.
- OLIVIA My phone is the same. Sometimes it's a message from a friend, and sometimes nothing.
- SEAN And the nothing makes you check again.
- OLIVIA Yes. Do you know the move where you pull the screen down?
- SEAN And new posts appear.

- OLIVIA** Or they don't! That's pull-to-refresh. A designer, Loren Brichter, made it for a Twitter app in 2009.
- SEAN** Did he want a slot machine?
- OLIVIA** He says no. But in 2017, the Guardian newspaper wrote about it. A former Google designer told them every swipe down is like a slot machine.
- SEAN** And Brichter? Was he angry?
- OLIVIA** He didn't argue with it. He said phones are useful but **addictive**, and he regrets the bad side.
- SEAN** That's quite honest. Okay, day two. The notifications are off. Is it better?
- OLIVIA** It was very quiet. I wrote a whole article in one morning.
- SEAN** Without one buzz?
- OLIVIA** Without one buzz. In 2015, a team at Florida State University gave people a boring computer task.
- SEAN** Boring on purpose?
- OLIVIA** Yes, it needed a lot of **focus**. Then they sent some people a text or a call.
- SEAN** And the people answered...
- OLIVIA** ...no, they didn't touch their phones. They only heard the sound.
- SEAN** And that was enough?
- OLIVIA** That was enough. They made more mistakes. Your mind asks, who is it? What do they want?
- SEAN** Did anybody try a whole week without notifications?
- OLIVIA** Yes! In Canada, in 2016, at the University of British Columbia. Two hundred and twenty-one people.
- SEAN** Let me guess. One week with notifications, and one week without.
- OLIVIA** Yes. With notifications on, people had more trouble with focus. They also felt **restless**.
- SEAN** So you copied two hundred Canadians.
- OLIVIA** I prefer "I followed the science."
- SEAN** Of course you do.
- OLIVIA** Before the experiment, I felt like a goldfish. People now have less attention than a goldfish, you know.
- SEAN** Oh, Olivia. No.
- OLIVIA** What? It's everywhere! Microsoft said it in 2015.
- SEAN** I worked at the BBC for years. And in 2017, a BBC journalist checked that number...
- OLIVIA** ...and it was true.
- SEAN** No. He found nothing. There was no study about people, and no study about goldfish.
- OLIVIA** So the goldfish is fake news.
- SEAN** The goldfish is innocent.
- OLIVIA** Fine. But there is a true number. A scientist in California, Gloria Mark, studied office workers on computers.
- SEAN** And?

- OLIVIA** In 2004, people stayed on one screen for two and a half minutes. In her newer studies, it's about forty-seven seconds.
- SEAN** Forty-seven seconds. That's worse than the goldfish!
- OLIVIA** The goldfish is innocent, remember?
- SEAN** Sorry. What about the drawer?
- OLIVIA** Day four was the worst. My phone was in the drawer. Then I felt a buzz in my pocket.
- SEAN** But your pocket was...
- OLIVIA** ...empty. Totally empty.
- SEAN** Oh, I know that feeling. Wait, sorry. I think my phone just buzzed...
- OLIVIA** ...Sean. Your phone is on the table, and it's off.
- SEAN** Right. Yes. It is.
- OLIVIA** Ten times a day, he says.
- SEAN** That's a different thing!
- OLIVIA** It's the same thing. The name is phantom vibration. In one American study, eighty-nine out of a hundred students felt it.
- SEAN** Eighty-nine? That's almost everybody. So why did the drawer help? You still felt the buzz.
- OLIVIA** Because of my favorite study. It's from 2017, at the University of Texas, with almost eight hundred people.
- SEAN** What did they do?
- OLIVIA** They did tests for memory and thinking. Some people had their phone on the desk. Some had it in a bag...
- SEAN** ...and some in another room?
- OLIVIA** Yes. And all the phones were silent. So, guess who did best.
- SEAN** No difference, surely. A silent phone does nothing.
- OLIVIA** Wrong. The other room did best, and the desk did worst.
- SEAN** Even when it was off?
- OLIVIA** Even when it was off. The researchers think ignoring it uses some of your attention.
- SEAN** So my phone, on this table...
- OLIVIA** ...is eating your brain a little. Later studies found a smaller effect, to be fair.
- SEAN** Fine. It's going in my bag.
- OLIVIA** The other room is better.
- SEAN** The bag is enough for today. Last summer I was on a canal boat. There was no phone signal for three days. On day one I was angry, and on day three I was happy.
- OLIVIA** Only three days? You need a longer boat.
- SEAN** And the gray screen? Did that do anything?
- OLIVIA** A little. In 2020, two researchers tried it with a hundred and sixty-one college students. Some of them used a gray screen for about a week.
- SEAN** And they used their phones less?
- OLIVIA** About forty minutes less every day.

- SEAN** So, day seven. But first, let me guess. You cheated.
- OLIVIA** On day three. I opened the drawer for one minute.
- SEAN** One minute. How long was it really?
- OLIVIA** Forty minutes of dog videos.
- SEAN** One minute.
- OLIVIA** But on day seven, my screen time was two and a half hours.
- SEAN** From five? That's...
- OLIVIA** ...half. And I read a whole book, a paper one.
- SEAN** So it was all good news.
- OLIVIA** Well, my friends moved our dinner, so I went to the wrong café.
- SEAN** Because you didn't check your phone.
- OLIVIA** Because I didn't check my phone. I sat alone with a coffee for half an hour.
- SEAN** Honestly, that sounds quite nice.
- OLIVIA** It was. Bellingham has very good coffee.
- SEAN** So you're cured now.
- OLIVIA** Not really. On day eight, the colors came back. But my notifications are still off.
- SEAN** And the drawer? Still your enemy?
- OLIVIA** We're friends now. Mostly.
- SEAN** So, listeners, here's a little challenge. Tomorrow, count every time you pick up your phone.
- OLIVIA** And for one hour, put your phone in another room. Then write a comment. What was your number, and what did you do in that hour?
- SEAN** The written version of this story is free, too. You can get the PDF just below this video.
- OLIVIA** Subscribe for more stories about your brain. And Sean is doing the challenge too.
- SEAN** Easy. Ten times a day.
- OLIVIA** I want the real number, Sean. See you next time!
- SEAN** Bye! And don't check your phone during the goodbye.

Did you understand?

Choose the correct answer.

1. Why did Olivia start her experiment?

- ☐ Her boss asked her to use her phone less.
- ☐ Her phone told her she used it five hours a day.
- ☐ She lost her phone for a week.

2. In Skinner's experiment, which pigeons pecked more?

- ☐ The pigeons that got food at random.
- ☐ The pigeons that got food every time.
- ☐ The pigeons that never got any food.

3. What happened in the 2015 study at Florida State University?

- ☐ People answered their phones and felt happy.
- ☐ People worked faster after a text.
- ☐ People only heard the sound, and they still made more mistakes.

4. What did the BBC journalist find about the goldfish number?

- ☐ He found no study about people and no study about goldfish.
- ☐ He found that the number was true.
- ☐ He found a study about goldfish in California.

5. In the University of Texas study, where was the phone when people did best?

- ☐ On the desk.
- ☐ In another room.
- ☐ In a bag.

Exercise 1. Who said it?

Complete the quote with a key word. Then guess who said it: Sean or Olivia?

1. "You laugh, but that drawer was my _____ all week."

Who said it? Sean / Olivia

2. "So the brain likes the _____ more than the prize?"

Who said it? Sean / Olivia

3. "So the _____ from my phone is the light."

Who said it? Sean / Olivia

4. "He said phones are useful but _____, and he regrets the bad side."

Who said it? Sean / Olivia

5. "But first, let me guess. You _____."

Who said it? Sean / Olivia

Exercise 2. Code breaker

Write the key word for each clue. The pink letters spell an animal from the episode.

1. Olivia did this for one week, with three new rules for her phone.

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2. Brichter said phones are useful, and they are also this.

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3. For the monkeys, the light was this. It said: juice is coming!

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4. Olivia's name for the kitchen drawer during her experiment.

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5. You need a lot of it for a boring computer task.

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6. In the Texas study, all the phones were like this. They made no sound.

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WHICH ANIMAL IS IT?

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Exercise 3. Your turn

Imagine you try Olivia's experiment for one week. Which rule is the hardest for you? Write three or four sentences. Use at least two words from the list.

Answer key

Check your answers after you finish the activities.

Did you understand?

1. Her phone told her she used it five hours a day.
2. The pigeons that got food at random.
3. People only heard the sound, and they still made more mistakes.
4. He found no study about people and no study about goldfish.
5. In another room.

Exercise 1. Who said it?

1. enemy (Olivia)
2. signal (Sean)
3. buzz (Sean)
4. addictive (Olivia)
5. cheated (Sean)

Exercise 2. Code breaker

1. experiment
2. addictive
3. signal
4. enemy
5. focus
6. silent

PIGEON Skinner's random pigeons kept pecking after the food stopped, just like Olivia in front of her gray screen.

Exercise 3. Example answer

The drawer would be my enemy. My phone buzzes all day, and I check it every time. First, I would turn off my notifications. On day three, I think I would cheat and watch cat videos.