

Cellphones Replace Smokes as the Addiction of Choice

By JOSH FREED, Freelance January
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I was in a movie theatre last week when that new warning cartoon came on urging us not to talk or text. Suddenly I remembered those old no-smoking signs they had outside theatres decades ago - and I realized the transformation is complete.

The cellphone has become the cigarette.

Everywhere you look, people hold phones instead of cigarettes up to their mouths - exhaling words instead of smoke. Meanwhile, the anti-cell lobby is becoming as visible as the anti-smoking one.

How else does the cellphone resemble the cigarette?

- First, cigarettes were an ideal way for fidgety people to do something with their hands, whether they were rolling, lighting, twirling, tapping or dragging on them.

But the cellphone has just as many rituals to keep fidgeters busy. You check your messages, organize your mail, then reorganize it - along with texting, Skyping, surfing, checking the weather for the 42nd time, or just fondling the keys.

Instead of making smoke rings, the cellphone just rings - and while you light up a cigarette, your phone lights up itself.

- Physically, phones have shrunk from the size of a brick to the size of - a cigarette pack. Men often carry them in their shirt pockets like they do their smokes. Women dump them in their purse like cigarette

packs and spend just as much time looking for them.

But at least you can phone your phone in your purse, while you couldn't phone your cigarettes. It won't be long before men start slipping their phones up their T-shirt sleeves, like they did cigarette packs decades ago.

- In restaurants you lay your phone right on the table for instant access just like you did your cigarette pack when you were still allowed to smoke in restaurants.

Cells are addictive like cigarettes, too - we clutch them needily while walking, driving, eating and even talking to others. I suspect that after sex, many people now reach over to check their messages, or text, instead of grabbing a smoke.

- Just like cigarettes, the Big Phone Industry grows by targeting the young with cheap plans aimed at hooking them for life. A three-pack-a-day smoker smoked 60 cigarettes daily. Today's average teenager sends over 100 texts a day, according to recent figures - that's probably as much time texting as smoking.

- For decades, cigarettes were an omnipresent movie prop that filled the screen with swirls of smoke - and film characters often smoked as they spilled their intimate secrets to the camera. Today, cigarette smoke is largely gone from the screen but cellphones ring constantly behind many scenes and are often used as props for characters to spill their intimate secrets.

If Hamlet were written today, his anguished words spoken to Yorick's skull would probably be replaced by a cellphone soliloquy.

- Cigarette pollution aggravates us - but cells create noise pollution that's just as annoying. Instead of second-hand smoke,

you get second-hand conversation. In fact, a phone can pollute a room quicker than a cigarette, as in a supermarket line when you hear someone hollering:

"They're out of salmon steaks, honey, so I'm getting tilapia, okay? But we need a side dish - look in the pantry to see if we have potatoes!! WHAT? - Honey - I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

Meanwhile, in the next aisle a teenager is anxiously saying: "Like I called him like an hour ago, but like, I don't like think he likes me anymore like I like him, like."

- One big difference is that smoking definitely causes cancer while studies are inconclusive on cellphones. The science isn't there, though the fear is growing fast.

Many people wear headsets for protection just like smokers used cigarette filters. But you don't see as many headsets in Montreal as in Toronto. Quebecers always liked strong, unfiltered cigarettes like Gitanes - and they don't like to filter their phones either.

We give babies fake cellphones for their cribs like we used to give them chocolate cigarettes.

- Now that cells are more common than cigarettes, anti-cell advocates are as zealous as anti-smokers. There are no-cell sections in many trains, hotels and restaurants, instead of no-cigarette sections. Most flights have banned cells just like they did cigarettes.

We will probably live to see cells banned in bars too, so you'll have to phone outside in the cold.

How long before we see class actions against Big Phone companies for deliberately addicting our kids to the nicotine of words, with cheap all-you-can-speak plans? How long before the first cellphone noise pollution settlement?

How long before there's a cigarette app on your phone that lets you flick a video flame and safely inhale a tobacco-flavoured scent?

You will virtually be smoking your cellphone.