

Always On: Reclaiming Your Attention in a World That Never Sleeps

Even our rest time is just filled with notifications, or the thought that you should get back to someone. There's research from Harvard that shows constant interruption from notifications increases anxiety and lowers concentration. It's as if we're always poised to be interrupted or to change focus.

Hi and welcome to *Keep Me Seen*. I'm Aileen. And I'm Julie. We're two friends navigating life's ups and downs together from opposite sides of the world.

Hi, Julie. I'm really good. What about yourself?

Good. Yeah, I'm pretty good.

Today's topic is something that's been on my mind a lot and keeps coming up. We actually touched on it in a podcast the other day. It's the idea that we're always available—the constant ping of messages on the phone, the fact that we're constantly reachable. We also have immediate access to everything. If we want to know something, we can know instantly. Shopping, TV shows, group spaces, all accessible on demand. It's a lot.

It's a heck of a lot. We're living in this always-on culture where you feel guilty if you don't respond right away. People see the double tick or the “read” notification and expect an instant reply. You also put that pressure on yourself, and if you don't respond quickly, you worry they'll think you're ignoring them or being rude. It's just constant.

There's a real conversation to have, not just about phone etiquette, but about what this does to our nervous systems. Constant accessibility changes how we live. It's not just about being accessible; it's about the capacity to do more. We can access information quickly, produce more in the office, participate in group chats, shop anytime—this creates a speed of living and a volume of capacity that we're expected to step into.

Absolutely. This affects everyone, from kids to adults. I remember growing up in the 70s; the phone in the hallway would ring maybe once or twice a day, and then that was it. Now, it's replaced with hundreds of micro-conversations every day. It's subtly exhausting.

Our phones are always in our hands, in pockets or handbags, giving us instant access to everything. Apparently, the average person picks up their phone 352 times a day—that's once every two to three minutes while awake. The average adult spends four and a half hours a day on their phone, which adds up to nearly 70 days a year. Two months of just scrolling, replying, searching—all of it. That hijacks your ability to be present.

The difference between phones and laptops is that laptops are used for more substantial tasks, while phones often keep us hooked on minor tasks. But it's not just the time; it's the mental load. Every message or notification opens a tab in your brain. Even if you don't reply, it lingers in your subconscious as a reminder that you need to act. It's like carrying an

invisible to-do list on top of the normal physical and emotional load—work, home, kids, aging parents. No wonder we're depleted.

I wasn't like this when I lived in Spain. I didn't even look at social media. How do couples maintain a sex life when carrying all this load? The mental load of managing the household, children, school apps, sports groups, family chats—it's huge. Often, mums manage this more than dads, and yet it's expected rather than recognized. Technology has multiplied this mental load instead of easing it.

Technology is supposed to make life easier, but it takes away natural pauses. I notice myself eating quicker because I can't relax. When I was pregnant living in Thailand without a smartphone, I was able to switch off easily. Now, life is overrun with constant connectivity. Our parents didn't have this; they could switch off when they came home. Today, even rest time is filled with notifications. Harvard research shows that constant interruptions increase anxiety and lower concentration, making it hard to focus deeply.

We end up confusing busyness with connection because there's so much noise around us. Being instantly responsive can feel like being caring. Working on a podcast has shown me how many connections distract rather than guide us. Scattered attention across multiple conversations affects our presence and self-worth. We feel obliged to respond quickly, and if we don't, it can feel like a judgment on our competence or kindness.

To mitigate this, one strategy is turning off read receipts and checking messages at set intervals. It reduces the pressure of immediate response. Young people need to learn these boundaries early to avoid developing addictive habits. There's even research on "phone walkers," showing that a large percentage of solitary people carry their phones constantly for comfort or reassurance.

Even if you put your phone on silent, we still check it constantly. The device itself becomes a source of comfort because it represents connection to the world. But we can create dedicated time for phone tasks, like an hour in the morning and another in the afternoon. Otherwise, the habit of instant response dominates.

Even after sitting down to catch up on messages for half an hour, it can be hard to put the phone down. This reinforces the mental load and distractibility that we're trying to manage. I find myself just clicking on apps for the sake of it.

I'll go, I'll just click the news app. I'll just click the weather app. Even if I'm not... do you know what I mean? And then I'll click the weather app again. I'm like, the weather hasn't changed, but it's just this kind of weird loop. I've noticed that I'll get in, and I can sort of see how people get addicted, because I have to then consciously go, okay, I've actually done everything I need to do. Put it down, pick up my book, get in bed. That's what I have to do. But I think we feel so compelled to do stuff when we're on the phone. And then you just don't end up enjoying the moment. It's like we're constantly in output mode.

Yeah, completely. I'm actually thinking about... we did an episode on addiction. And you're someone in my life who has never had any addiction issues, so it's really interesting to see how this is affecting you. Imagine people who really actually have proper addiction issues.

I get it, because I do sit there at night. If I've been on it for half an hour or more, then I can't put it down. I'm like, okay, click this app, click that app... there's nothing changed.

But, yeah, I know. I noticed the other day I was walking through the park—I love looking at the squirrels—and I thought, I should take a photo of something. It's so beautiful. And then I thought, why can't I just be in the moment and enjoy this beauty? I've been at concerts and started filming, then had to stop myself and just enjoy the music. I've actually seen some DJs online get really angry when people have their cameras out. You'd think they'd love it, but they're like, we want them to enjoy the moment.

“Yeah, that's the big thing. You're capturing the moment in a photo or whatever. We're curating our lives instead of living them. Which is crazy. And it's funny because when we talk about burnout, people think it's about doing too much at work, but digital burnout is just as real. Even studies from the World Health Organization are starting to link constant connectivity with chronic fatigue and anxiety.

Oh my goodness, I'm not surprised either. There is no off switch. And as you said, because we can technically reply at any time, there's always one more thing to do, one more message to answer.

Perhaps. Like I was saying earlier, I just can't believe how I've fallen into this. I didn't do it until I moved back to London, and I've never felt this fatigued. I know I'm in perimenopause, but I know it's the digital stuff as well.

Yeah, that's the thing. It creates a pressure, and it is tiring. But I think this is where boundaries have to come in. Not in a harsh way, but boundaries don't have to mean cutting people off. You can make small adjustments, like deciding to reply in the morning. You know, at seven o'clock at night, you can say, I'm not replying to anything. Or turn off notifications, set 'Do Not Disturb' hours, and stop picking up the phone every time.

I know, it's true. But I think it might be trickier for people like us who have an 11-hour time difference to navigate.

Well, with us, I know, but we can just say, I'm only going to check Aileen. I do that before I go to bed. I always write to you and say, is there anything else I need to look at before I switch off?

No, you're good like that. And you know what's interesting? Researchers found it takes around 23 minutes to refocus after a digital interruption. So if you're checking your phone 10 times an hour, you're never focused at all.

That's really interesting... 23 minutes to refocus. That's sad.

We wonder why we're frazzled. We think we're just tired, but it's cognitive overload. Constant partial attention never lets our nervous systems fully regulate. Even if it's not full attention, your partial attention is on it. It's like living with one foot on the accelerator and one on the brake, which is terrible. And there's also that emotional side—the guilt. That compulsion to reply or respond for fear of upsetting someone or being judged, which ties to self-worth.

Hi, just a quick note before we get back to the episode. If you've been enjoying *Keep Me Seen*, you might love our Sanity Cheques—short weekly episodes where we share what's on our minds. They've been part of the podcast since the very beginning, little check-ins about what's weighing on us, what we're learning, and how we're holding it together. Now they're exclusively on Patreon, where we go deeper, more candid, more unfiltered, and a little more connected. You can join for the price of a coffee a month. Just search *Keep Me Seen* on Patreon or head to the link in our show notes.

Yeah, absolutely. And of course it's worse for women because we carry that guilt. We've been conditioned to be agreeable, responsive, and nurturing. So saying, 'I'll reply later,' feels rebellious and unkind. But guilt often appears when we start choosing ourselves. It's not wrongdoing, it's growth. Every time you pause before reacting, you teach your body safety—that you don't have to be on call for everyone else to be worthy of love.

Exactly. Back to the days when emails first came in, people used to check them once a day. We just need to reset our expectations back to that. The expectation of immediate replies on every channel—text, Slack, WhatsApp, Instagram—is nuts. Most of the time, the urgency isn't real. We've normalized hyper-responsiveness.

Absolutely. And it's worse than with kids. We've confused responsiveness with reliability. Reliability is showing up when it matters, not replying instantly at all costs. I think it affects relationships too. Research must exist because we're always reachable. We never get a chance to miss each other. There's something powerful about space. It lets connection breathe. How can you long for someone who never leaves your pocket?

I think there's something in that. Yeah, you're right. And it probably goes for friendships too. There's this sense that if you're not constantly chatting, the friendship must be fading. But some of our deepest friendships are the ones where we can go quiet for ages and then pick up right where we left off. That depth is what we rely on.

Yeah, that's real connection. It really plays out at work as well. We feel guilty for not being instantly available to colleagues. This is so true. There's a culture of 'if you can reply, you should,' which is dangerous because without boundaries, burnout is inevitable. France passed a 'right to disconnect' law a few years ago. Companies have to let employees log off after hours.

That is brilliant. Actually, that should be a law here too—a scheduled digital Sabbath every evening.

Oh yeah, *Keep Me Seen* signing up immediately. We are on board. But that's the thing, right? We know constant connection is hurting us, but we all still do it. It's partly addiction, that dopamine loop, and partly fear—fear of being left out, seen as unkind, or missing something important. It comes down to self-worth and practical realities. If everyone else is on after hours, you could get left behind. That's why it needs to be universal to work.

And then there's parents. The feeling of needing to be reachable 'just in case.' Back in the day, there wasn't that option. My mum was actually better off not knowing exactly what I was doing while traveling. Whereas now, if something happened while you were on a

self-imposed digital detox, you wouldn't forgive yourself. There are reasons to check in, yes, but we also need boundaries.

Safety anxiety is definitely mixed in there, especially for mums. We could literally get left out of important decisions because the world moves on regardless. Then there's perfectionism—the sense we need to manage everything, reply to everyone, stay on top. Back to self-worth. It's an impossible standard. We need to analyze what we instantly respond to—what's necessary and what's just performance.

Exactly. Is it people-pleasing or low self-worth disguised as efficiency? That steals peace. I started doing something recently: when I get a message, I just read it, breathe, and remind myself not everything requires an immediate reaction. Coming back later, my response is calmer, kinder, and more thoughtful. Instant doesn't mean better—it's often reactive.

So maybe the question is: what are we afraid will happen if we're not instantly responding? Will people stop liking us? Will we miss out? Will something fall apart? Usually, no. That pause can be productive. Digest, think, return with a better headspace. Most things can wait. The things that can't, you can handle with more presence because you're not running on empty from answering the 90% that don't matter.

We've got to normalize slow replies. Tell friends, 'no rush to reply.' Bring that energy back, give people permission to respond when they're ready. I say that in voice messages too: don't feel you have to respond. Half the pressure comes from ourselves thinking we have to respond, not from others. When you're gentle with your own pace, people usually match it. That ties to self-worth. When you believe your worth is tied to responsiveness, it's impossible to risk. You're still worthy even if offline. You're not out of the loop, you're in your life. The goal isn't digital detox, it's digital boundaries.

Exactly. Decide how you want to relate to your phone instead of letting it dictate your mood. For example, I try not to check my phone until after breakfast. I never scroll social media, and I've turned off all but essential notifications. My phone sleeps in the kitchen. I've told friends I might reply later, but I still care. No one's ever been offended. The world didn't end. There's something empowering about reclaiming your attention—it's like saying, I decide when I'm available. The attention economy profits from our distraction. When you step out of that, you take back control. You start noticing little things again.

So maybe our challenge this week is to create one phone-free pocket of time each day. Maybe 10 or 15 minutes, an hour if you can. No scrolling, no replying—just being. Notice what comes up. When I did it with Cora, she felt the twitchiness, the boredom—that's your nervous system recalibrating. Underneath that discomfort is calm. If you feel overwhelmed by messages or guilty for not keeping up, remember: you do not owe anyone constant access. Your worth isn't measured in response times. Smile at guilt—it just means you're choosing yourself.

We'd love to hear how you manage your digital boundaries. Do you have phone-free time? Do you struggle with feeling you have to reply immediately? Share with us on Instagram @ukmeseanpod or leave a voicemail. We might include your thoughts in a future episode. And don't forget Patreon for our short Sanity Cheques each week—subscribe for the cost of a coffee a month. We'd love to have you there. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next time.