

# Mobile Wellbeing

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## ABSTRACT

While mobile phones can be empowering, constant access to a world of people and information can also bring distraction from the present moment and from the people and things that are physically present in ways that are sometimes unwanted. Excessive use of mobile phones can also have negative consequences on our sleep and concentration. In many respects mobile phones are challenging for our general mental wellbeing. Many designers are now looking into ways to better support mental wellbeing, be it through apps for mindfulness and meditation, or the better design of notifications and sleep modes. People are also developing strategies and ways of coping with the negative aspects of mobile technology, from self-control based approaches such as uninstalling social media apps or not keeping phones by the bedside, to more practice-based approaches such as meditation. This workshop aims to bring researchers and practitioners together to discuss mobile technology, human practice and mental wellbeing.

## Author Keywords

Mobile wellbeing; mental health; mindfulness; mobile technology; smartphones.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## INTRODUCTION

As technology becomes pervasive in our lives and we become increasingly digitally connected, many fear that we are becoming less connected to the people and world around us [4, 5]. Increasingly, we hear doubts about whether technology, particularly mobile technology, is good for our social and mental wellbeing. Most prominently, Lanier has proclaimed “you are not a gadget”

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[8], and Turkle has warned that we are becoming “Alone Together” [7]. At the same time, we are increasingly seeing people turn to technology to handle stress, social isolation and negative emotions. For example, there is an abundance of mindfulness and meditation apps, there is support for mourning in online communities, and commonly used hashtags on social media for mental health issues.

So is technology both the cause of, and solution to contemporary problems of mental wellbeing? Robinson et al. [6] argue that technology is not inherently good or bad for us, but that it embodies design values. Therefore, the question becomes how do we design for mental wellbeing? Levy [9], on the other hand, argues that we as users need to be more mindful in our approach to technology, asking “how might we more skillfully use the tools we’ve developed?”

Meanwhile, an industry is emerging around the development of apps and hardware intended to support mental wellbeing. One of the most popular apps, Headspace, is produced by a company led by an ordained Buddhist monk that recently closed a \$30 million venture capital funding round.

There are both commercial and academic mobile apps that monitor mental wellbeing and promote a healthy lifestyle. However, many of these apps have not been rigorously tested for efficacy or effectiveness when addressing mental health issues. It is also likely that there are disjoints between the intended and actual uses of these apps. As the industry emerges and the popularity of digitally mediated therapy and training increases, significant questions emerge.

This workshop aims at addressing such questions, through the examination of three general themes:

- Impact – In what ways do mobile technologies impact mental wellbeing?
- Design – How can mobile technologies be designed to support and improve mental wellbeing and to mitigate negative effects?
- Practice – What strategies and practices can be developed for using mobile technology in ways that do not harm and instead support improvement of our wellbeing?

We will discuss how to bridge the gaps between self-monitoring and self-insight, between intended and actual use, and between design-based and practice based approaches to wellbeing. We will examine the need (if one exists) and possibilities for moving beyond self-awareness toward identifying technologies and practices that can help foster mental wellbeing.

### **Workshop Themes**

For the *impact theme* we want to explore in what way the use of mobile technology as it currently exists affects our mental wellbeing. As a constant companion in our lives, the smartphone is readily available to fill any empty moment with time spent using our phones. And even in those instances when the phone may not be near (for what ever reason), there might be a tablet, smart watch, or even someone else's phone. How may this availability affect our mental wellbeing, both short-term and long-term? Nicholas Carr argues that the use of internet has changed the way we think [2], and has been reported to say about the smartphone:

“The smartphone, more than any other gadget, steals from us the opportunity to maintain our attention, to engage in contemplation and reflection, or even to be alone with our thoughts.” [3]

If this is true, what are the implications for our mental health and wellbeing?

The *design theme* then relates to what it is about mobile technology that has these effects, and whether there are ways to design in order to control the impact on mental wellbeing. Calvo and Peters set out an agenda for this type of work termed Positive Computing [1]. Positive Computing refers to attending to the engineering and design of computing technology with mental health and wellbeing in mind. They put an emphasis not only on mitigating negative health effects, but also on fostering positive mental wellbeing. Are there ways in which mobile phones can be designed so that they make us happier, calmer, or give us pleasure – beyond the ability they have to entertain us, to connect us with loved ones, and help us achieve our goals.

Mobile technology as it exists in our lives is relative new and still changing, and we believe there are great opportunities for experimentation in this design space. While there are some differences in how different mobile operating systems work, they are all designed to allow for quick access to its functions and to give us information with as few interactions as possible. But this might not be the best way forward. Here we want to discuss work on e.g. calm technology and workshop participants' experience in working in this domain.

Lastly, for the *practice theme*, we want to discuss strategies and practices we can adopt and are adopting in order to foster mental wellbeing and to prevent negative harm. There are apps out there that can help us flourish, but there

are also ways in which we decide to use and adopt mobile technology to make it better fit into our messy everyday lives. To improve the quality of sleep, it is often recommended to not bring technology into the bedroom, and to relax away from a screen just before bedtime. Because of the temptation to use and ease to do so, there are many ways in which people attempt to prevent its availability. Apps can be installed to remind you how much you have used a certain app, or that you are supposed to focus on some particular task. Family members may put their phones at a particular place away from the dinner table, as to bring the family together during meals without distractions from the phone.

The increasing interest in mindfulness techniques has lead to an emerging market of apps and devices. But is there a natural fit between technology and the practice of mindfulness, or are they at odds with each other? If Nicholas Carr is right and the mobile phone robs us of our attention [3], how can we turn it around and steal it back?

These three themes can only be treated by an interdisciplinary set of researchers and practitioners. There is a lot of work to be done in order to understand mobile technology and its relation to mental wellbeing. In an ever-changing world of technology, we have a responsibility and opportunity to contribute to the understanding and to the design of future technology and use. The workshop will contribute to this through discussions and making plans for future work.

### **THE WORKSHOP**

This is an all-day workshop that will run from 9am-5pm. It will be organized into four parts, punctuated with breaks for lunch and coffee. Each part will be spearheaded with a meditation session in spirit of the workshop theme. Before the first part we will have a short presentation on focused attention followed by a 10-15 minutes meditation. Before each subsequent part we will refocus our attention with a short experiential exercise. We hope this will enable us to conduct our workshop in a mode of increased awareness.

In the first part each participant presents his or her position paper for five minutes. This will help participants to get to know each other's current work and interests in the topic of the workshop. Following each presentation, there will be time for questions and discussion. The second part of the workshop will be an exploration of the three questions given in the introduction. The participants will work in groups to explore each question. The third part of the workshop will involve presentations from each group about the issues they have discussed. The final part of the workshop will be a discussion of how the group will organize to maintain contact and continue the work. Several possibilities will be explored here, including a special issue for a journal on the topic of mobile wellbeing and discussions of joint research grant applications.

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