

Where Does Our Free Time Go in Retirement? Too Often, It's Social Media

We're trying to fight our **smartphone addiction**. But with so much time on our hands, and no job calling us, it isn't easy.

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PAUL BLOW FOR WSJ

The first few years in retirement are often the most difficult. But they also can set the stage for how you'll fill the years ahead—both financially and psychologically. Stephen Kreider Yoder, 68, a longtime Wall Street Journal editor, joined his wife, Karen Kreider Yoder, 69, in retirement in late 2022. In this monthly [Retirement Rookies column](#), they chronicle some of the issues they are dealing with early in retirement.

Steve

I took my iPhone and our decrepit vacuum into my workshop after supper, googled “Kenmore Progressive vacuum noisy” and found what I wanted—a YouTube video showing how to replace the motor bearings.

Then one of my biggest retirement demons possessed me.

It was nearly 11 p.m. when I looked up from my phone. The vacuum sat unfixed on the workbench. I must have been in a trance as I clicked through dozens of clips—fix-it videos, rescue-dog accounts, road-rage incidents, segments of “Justified” episodes.

Here is where I need to make a confession: I led with a similar anecdote in our January 2024 column, in which I vowed to kick the social-media habit.

I did. For a few weeks. Then I fell off the wagon and have oscillated between forswearing online clips and letting them suck me into the phone’s black hole.

I’m part of an epidemic among retirees, I’m convinced. Studies warn us that social media may harm children, and such scrutiny is critical. Addictive sites clearly can plague working adults, too.

But we retirees have a particular vulnerability. We have time on our hands and no external authority telling us to snap out of it.

Let’s have a show of hands: How many retirees have ended a day looking up from the phone, wondering where the time went and feeling the mental equivalent of having finished off a family-size bag of potato chips?

Yeah, that’s what I thought.

On the job, I did my share of surreptitious video-watching and Twitter-scrolling and e-commercing. But deadlines and bosses drew me back into the real world, much as the schoolday and homework and parents broke my TV trance as a kid.

As a retiree, I have little to rely on but self-control, of which I have little when my phone is in hand.

A bender often starts out nobly. I search YouTube for how to fix the dishwasher, or Instagram to check progress on renovations in our favorite park. After offering useful insights, my phone begins serving short, enticing clips—oh, what can it hurt to watch this 8-second video of a bison attacking an RV?—that seem just as innocuous as those first few chips from the family-size bag. Much later comes the familiar bloated self-loathing.

Is the habit any worse than vegging out with the television? Or bingeing on trashy novels? I don't know. But there's something uniquely insidious about how the phone is eager to sop up the bounty of time that retirement has granted me.

The internet foils resistance in hydra-headed ways. I deleted my X app, then felt out of touch and signed up to Bluesky. I avoided installing TikTok, but other apps figured out how to dangle similar fare.

Not that my phone is all-consuming. I spend hours happily fixing house issues, meeting friends, volunteering. One reason we bicycle for a few hours most days is to break from unhealthful routines of mind and body.

But as soon as I'm back home, some primordial instinct has me almost subconsciously reaching for my iPhone with no purpose.

I need a mindful strategy to handle this marvelous, insidious technology, now that it's up to me. My remaining time is too precious.

Karen

"But I'm wedded to my phone," I told the Apple Genius Bar technician last month when she wanted to keep it for an iOS update overnight. "I can't leave without it."

She fixed it on the spot.

My phone is my addiction, especially now that I have lots of unstructured time. I've been wrestling, like Steve, to find ways to free myself from the black hole in my pocket.

In the dim morning hours, while drinking my first cup of coffee and after reading the San Francisco Chronicle in print, I do Wordle and send my results to my three sisters, who have typically posted their scores in their earlier time zones.

Which leads me to check the weather, my schedule for the day, and then Facebook. I get sucked in, coming up for air only when Steve wakes up and comes down the stairs several hours later and hopes for a little attention. That's when I quickly hide my phone, as if it's a secret bottle of gin.

After dinner, I'll sit on the couch before going upstairs for the evening. I catch up with friends' posts, add a few comments, and get updates from experts on quilting sites I

belong to.

That then leads to clicking an Instagram reel, and then another and another. I watch a little boy and his dad cooking dinner—irresistible. A young British boy collects eggs and describes the intricacies of chicken breeds in the most delightful way. Which leads to an update from the woman who is working to get out of her abusive marriage. She's almost free! So I keep going back to root for her.

And it's an hour later. Time for bed.

I should have only responded to my real friends, put the phone down, and retreated to my sewing room to work on a project—for instance, repairing the bike-seat covers.

I have some tricks to curb my addiction a bit. Late mornings when my phone battery needs a boost, I plug it in upstairs, far from the kitchen where I'm prepping salad. That keeps me from picking it up. But I know it's up there, calling to me.

As if speaking to me, a psychologist on NPR last week suggested that striving for willpower may not be the answer. "What looks like willpower is often actually good habits and good systems," she said. "People who succeed aren't constantly resisting temptation—they're structuring their lives so temptation doesn't show up as often."

I posed a question to my four siblings, three of them retired, on our "Four Sisters and the Brother" WhatsApp site. "What do each of you do to stay off your phone?"

They agreed their phones pose a problem. My brother gave up phone-scrolling for Lent, mostly successfully. Instead, he checks news on his laptop. An older sister turns to sewing her bin of fabric scraps into a quilt top or putting together a jigsaw puzzle to get her dopamine. Or cleaning neglected spots.

My sister who holds greater willpower than any of us, said she limits herself to "X minutes a day," then turns off her phone. The third sister limits her scrolling to her commute time on the train. On bad days, she says, she convinces herself that "doomscrolling flat on my couch is what helps my back heal."

As the psychologist on NPR suggested, I need to stop kicking myself for not having willpower and find structure that keeps me off my phone.

One reliable respite has been our long tandem-bike tours, when there's little time for social-media bingeing and so much dopamine to be had from the scenery and pedaling and chatting with Steve as we move along. We have several tours planned for this spring and summer, when I expect to be firmly on the wagon.

Getting back home, though, I'll need to face the demon again.

Steve Yoder was bureau chief of The Wall Street Journal's San Francisco bureau. He oversaw 12 reporters and editors covering technology, venture capital, science, the environment, the California government and regional issues across a geographical area stretching from Utah west to Hawaii and...