

'It made my day more meaningful': the Japanese gen Zers attempting a two-hour limit on smartphone use

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Look at the image and discuss the questions in pairs.



1. Where might it be appropriate to see a sign like this? Where would it not be appropriate?
2. What reason could someone have for controlling their use of smartphones?
3. How could using your smartphone less change your daily routine?

2 Key words

a. Match the correct word to each definition. Then find them in the article to read them in context.

excessive
conceded
asset
claimed
measure

controversial
devote
enforced
interfering
meaningful

phenomenon
sacrificing
toll
scrolling
sleep deprivation

initiative
ordinance
amid
worthwhile
struggle

1. something unusual or interesting that happens and can be studied _____
2. an action taken to achieve or control something _____
3. causing strong disagreement or discussion among people _____
4. enjoyable and useful although it needs a lot of effort _____
5. a new plan or action to solve a problem or improve a situation _____
6. a law or rule that limits or controls something _____
7. giving up something important to get or do something else _____
8. having a serious or important purpose for the person doing it _____

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9. more than is reasonable or necessary; too much _____
10. the bad effect caused by something over a long period of time _____
11. the condition of not getting enough sleep _____
12. admitted that something was true or that you were wrong _____
13. getting involved in something that is not your business _____
14. to spend a lot of time, energy, or attention on doing something _____
15. moving text or images on a screen up or down to see more _____
16. said that something was true, even if it may not have been proven _____
17. a situation in which you try very hard to do something difficult _____
18. in the middle of or surrounded by something _____
19. made to happen by using rules, laws or authority _____
20. something or someone that is valuable or useful _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.

1. Don't study all night before a test because _____ makes it hard to concentrate.
2. Please don't _____ in their argument—it's a personal thing between them.
3. Eating _____ amounts of sugar is bad for your teeth and your mood.
4. The box was so heavy that it was a real _____ to lift it.
5. The police may finally _____ that they have made mistakes in the case.
6. Parents will often _____ their happiness for their children.
7. The school started a(n) _____ to plant trees around the campus.

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8. She was smoking a cigarette despite the hospital _____.
9. My aunt used to _____ that she often saw famous people in her local supermarket.
10. She will often _____ several hours a day to studying English.
11. His phone so many photos that he can _____ for ages before finding the right one.
12. She wants to have a(n) _____ job that helps people.
13. Stress can take a(n) _____ on your physical and mental health.
14. The teacher stayed calm _____ the noise of the classroom.
15. The government introduced a new _____ to reduce pollution.
16. It is a very _____ new law and there are many protests.
17. The course is difficult, but it is _____ because of the amount you learn.
18. The Northern Lights are a natural _____ that many people travel to see.
19. The government _____ a rule that everyone had to wear seatbelts.
20. Her communication skills are a great _____ to the team.

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Authorities in Japan are taking action against excessive phone time – but what is it like to restrict scrolling to 120 minutes a day?

Justin McCurry

8 October, 2025

- 1 Despite working full-time for a company in Tokyo, Shoki Moriyama manages to eke out eight hours a day to devote to his smartphone.
- 2 "I need my phone to navigate my way through the information wars," says Moriyama, who at 25 is part of a generation that can't imagine life without scrolling through news and social media, messaging apps and off-the-wall video clips.
- 3 He is not alone. While excessive smartphone use is a worldwide phenomenon, authorities in Japan are taking action, amid growing concern over its physical and psychological toll, particularly on children and young people.
- 4 Last week, the town of Toyoake in central Japan introduced a measure limiting smartphone use among its 69,000 residents to two hours a day, in what officials say was an attempt to tackle evidence of online addiction and sleep deprivation. The ordinance – passed by the town assembly last month – does not carry penalties for those who ignore it.
- 5 Moriyama was among several people, all in their 20s, who accepted the Guardian's challenge to keep their smartphone use to a maximum of two hours and share their experiences.
- 6 There were resounding successes and abject failures.
- 7 Moriyama, who habitually checks LINE – an instant-messaging, news and entertainment "super app" popular in Japan – as well as TikTok, Instagram and X, conceded that staying off the sites, or at least dramatically curtailing his usage, had been a struggle.
- 8 "I spend around eight hours a day on my phone, so two hours is way too little ... and not enough time for me to stay up to date with everything," he says. "In the end I used my smartphone for an hour and 50 minutes, which is a massive reduction on my usual screen time. I used the extra time to read a book, study a little and go to the gym, so my day wasn't wasted."
- 9 His colleague Tomomi Hanaoka also managed to rein in her habit. "I spend about three hours on my phone on weekdays and six or seven hours at weekends, so two hours felt very short. Most people need at least three to four hours," says Hanaoka, who usually "can't do" without LINE, TikTok and Instagram.
- 10 "I kept my usage to two hours and used the free time to read and do other things."
- 11 Yuri* has already tried to limit her smartphone use, usually when she has exams coming up, even going as far as to hide Instagram and set a password-activated lock for good measure.
- 12 She uses her device to check social media, search for recipes, send texts and access study materials, although too much screen time gives her headaches and tired eyes.
- 13 Toyoake's mayor, Masafumi Koki, defended the measure, which drew dozens of complaints from residents who accused the local government of interfering in their private lives.
- 14 Koki says he was worried that children and younger people were sacrificing sleep and family time in favour of scrolling, texting and posting.
- 15 After a wave of online criticism, some of which wrongly claimed the two-hour limit would be strictly enforced, he told the Mainichi Shimbun newspaper: "If someone hears two hours, they'll stop and think about how long they really use their smartphone for. That's the point."
- 16 Young Japanese spend an average of just over five hours a day online on weekdays, according to a survey released this year by the Children and Families Agency.
- 17 Aya* spends considerably more time on her device than the national average, regularly clocking up eight hours a day.
- 18 "I couldn't limit myself to just two hours, but just being conscious of the challenge made a difference. In the end, I was able to cut down my usual smartphone use by about 60 per cent, which felt significant," the university student says, conceding that she had consulted a travel planner and checked her emails and texts.
- 19 She voiced support for the Toyoake initiative, speculating that the absence of penalties could be its biggest asset.

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- 20 "That's precisely what makes it meaningful ... you have to set your own rules and adjust them accordingly. It's an important opportunity to think concretely about our daily habits, rather than just in an abstract way."
- 21 And she did not miss the hours she usually spends "aimlessly scrolling".
- 22 "I spent more time enjoying conversations and taking notice of what was happening around me. It made my day feel more meaningful."
- 23 That will be music to the ears of Koki. On the eve of his town's controversial experiment in social engineering, the mayor insisted it would be worthwhile. "This is about sleep, family and wellbeing," he says. "If the ordinance makes even a few people stop and talk about their habits, then it's working."
- *Name has been changed on request.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. What smartphone habits are typical of Shoki Moriyama's generation?
2. How many hours a day does Moriyama usually spend on his smartphone?
3. What new rule did the town of Toyoake introduce for its residents?
4. Which smartphone apps do Moriyama and Hanaoka often use?
5. What did Moriyama do with his extra time when he reduced his phone use?
6. Why did some people complain about the new smartphone rule?
7. What did Toyoake's mayor say the town's young people were giving up?
8. Typically, how much time do young Japanese people spend online during the week?
9. Why does Aya say the lack of penalties was meaningful?
10. According to the mayor, what will be the sign that the new rule is working?

4 Key language

a. Select the correct particle (*in / out / up / down*) and complete the phrasal verb table with phrasal verbs from the sentences below according to the definitions.

1. Shoki Moriyama manages to eke out eight hours a day to devote to his smartphone.
2. Tomomi Hanaoka also managed to rein in her habit.
3. Aya regularly clocks up eight hours a day on her device.
4. I was able to cut down my usual smartphone use by about 60 per cent.

(1) in / out / up / down	(2) in / out / up / down	(3) in / out / up / down	(4) in / out / up / down
reduce or decrease something	control or restrain something	use something until it is finished	build a total over a long time

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b. Complete the sentences using the verb in brackets and the correct particle. You might have to change the form of the word.

1. He was trying to _____ (hold) his tears as he told the story.
2. Please _____ (turn) the volume on the TV.
3. She could barely _____ (keep) her anger.
4. She's worried she will _____ (burn) if she keeps working so hard.
5. The emails have been _____ (stack) in my inbox all week.
6. The police have _____ (narrow) the suspects to two people.
7. They are _____ (save) for a new car.
8. We've _____ (run) of coffee

c. Finish the sentences below.

I know I need to cut down ... _____

When I'm on my phone, I probably clock up ... _____

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- Smartphone use only has a positive effect on our culture.
- Governments should control how we use technology.
- It is impossible to change the amount of time we spend on our phones.

6 In your own words

a. Conduct a survey on smartphones in your class. Record the answers of your classmates and be prepared to compare them. Use these questions to guide you.

- Which apps do you use on your smartphone?
- How many hours per day do you use your smartphone?
- At which times of day do you use your smartphone the most?

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- How typical is your smartphone usage in your group of friends?
- How often do you check your phone when you are with family or friends?
- What else could you do with the time you spend on your phone?
- What effect has your use of your smartphone had on your life?
- How would you help someone who wanted to control their use of a smartphone?
- What changes would you like to make in your smartphone habits?

- b. **Present your survey results to the class. Compare the different members of the class and describe people who use their smartphone a little and those who use it a lot. Include phrasal verbs such as *cut down*, *rein in* and *eke out* in your presentation. Here is an example.**

The results of my survey showed there was a lot of variety in how people in the class use their smartphones. Someone amazingly managed to eke out over nine hours a day on the phone. Some people have cut down on their use of smartphones by only using their smartphone when they are in the street. Everyone in the class thought reining in their use of smartphones a little would be a good idea.