

Don't throw your phone away for a fuller life. 3 changes can give you more meaning.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2026/05/30/health/meaning-of-life-tech-arthur-brooks-wellness>

By Madeline Holcombe.

Updated May 30, 2026

At the dawn of emerging technology around internet use and smartphone access, marketers promised that they would reduce the mundane tasks for people and leave room for the things that matter. Those could be relationships, creative endeavours and the contemplation of big questions about life.

The problem is that people grew comfortable turning to their devices to reduce difficulty in all aspects of their lives, which can drive them further from a sense of meaning, said Arthur Brooks, Parker Gilbert Montgomery Professor of the Practice of Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School and professor of management practice at the Harvard Business School. (Brooks will be leaving his Harvard professorship to become an endowed professor at Vanderbilt University in July.)

“Any time the technology is a substitute for the things that we truly want in our hearts, it makes our life worse,” he said. “If it’s a complement, that’s really, really good.”

In his new book, “The Meaning of Your Life: Finding Purpose in an Age of Emptiness,” Brooks explores why so many people feel a lack of meaning and what to do to nurture purpose and fulfilment. How you use smartphones and digital technology can be a big factor in helping or inhibiting a sense of meaning, he said.

“The answer is to not throw away your phone. I mean good if you want to — you can throw it in the ocean and go join a monastery, but most of us are not going to do that,” Brooks said. “We actually need our phones, but they should be tools.”

Complex vs. complicated problems.

To understand better usage of smartphones and social media, it can be helpful to differentiate between complex and complicated problems, Brooks said. It may sound like synonyms for the same thing, but assigning nuance can be helpful.

“Complex problems are easy to understand and impossible to solve,” he said. “Complicated problems are hard to solve, but you can solve them, and once you do, they’re solved forever.”

For example, building a skyscraper is complicated. You have to learn a lot, be precise, follow many steps and solve a lot of problems. But there is an answer. And having the right tools, which may now include artificial intelligence, can help bring you closer to completing such a project.

How to build a loving relationship that can stand the test of time or what it means to be a good friend aren’t really problems for which you can find definitive answers. These complex questions are ones you are supposed to wrestle with over and over, gaining insight but never reaching a final destination, he said.

Complex questions are the kinds that people should spend more time with to create a greater sense of meaning, Brooks noted, but they are also the ones for which technology can appear to create shortcuts that don’t actually work.

One case in point: Social media promised to address increasing feelings of loneliness by connecting people, Brooks said. But research shows that more time online can make isolation worse. A May study suggested that using social media doesn’t help strengthen connections and can leave people feeling lonelier.

“Loneliness got worse,” he said, “because the complicated solution never solves the complex problem.”

Now, a similar situation exists with AI, he said. Is it a powerful tool or a dangerous pacifier that pretends to meet human needs while still leaving you empty?

“AI is unbelievably complicated. It can take complicated problems out of your life and give you time,” Brooks said. “How will you spend the time? If you spend them in the complex experiences of the human heart, the parts of your life that have love and faith, the things that are mysterious, the things that actually bring meaning, you’re going to win.

“But if you use AI to try to solve your complex problems by making AI your buddy or your lover or your therapist, you’re going to make your life a whole lot worse.”

Digital experiences are not the real thing, and they can never give you all the nuanced things that make up the human experience.

“You will never be able to simulate the meaning of your life,” he said.

Embrace boredom. You need it to help create more meaning.

If you’ve ever come up with your best idea in the shower or spent time contemplating life’s paradoxes on a long drive, you might have a pretty good sense of why time away from the phone (and with a little boredom) is so important. A smartphone, with endless scrolling through social media, is an anti-boredom device. And while it may sound appealing, avoiding boredom so consistently is a huge roadblock to feeling fulfilled, he said. Boredom gives the brain a chance to enter something called the “default mode network,” which is a wakeful, unfocused rest state of your brain that allows your mind to wander, he said. That mind wandering is when you can start daydreaming or picking at those overarching questions about life.

“We need to be better at boredom. We need be elite athletes at boredom, because once we do that, we’re going to find that our life feels deeper and more meaningful,” Brooks said. Curbing day-to-day moments of boredom by reaching right for your phone interrupts time in your internal world, and doing so actually leads to a larger feeling of boredom across your life, he said.

3 ways to use tech better.

Brooks has three tech protocols he uses in his life that he says helps keep devices functioning as tools instead of cutting him off from a feeling of meaning, he said.

The **first** one happens right when he wakes up, he said.

For the first hour of his day, he tries to be free of his phone. For some people and some professions, doing so isn’t totally possible, and you might need to check an email or schedule early on, but then the phone goes away, he said.

“And then that hour is yours for all the things that you want to do, for taking a walk, for reading something like a book, whatever it happens to be, having a conversation with your husband, talking to your friends, doing the things that will actually start your day,

exercising for example, saying your prayers, the things that are important to you,” he said. “That’s the first hour of the day.”

Other experts agree that scrolling the first thing in the morning doesn’t set you up for a good day. One change I made to my social media use made a big difference on my mood. Going from sleeping to scrolling can be a difficult transition; you are starting your day with blue light, which can influence cortisol, the body’s primary stress hormone, and potentially stressful content such as bad news, work demands or social media politics, Dr. Charlotte Armitage, a psychologist at Be Device Wise, a UK-based program designed to teach students to reduce their screen time, told CNN in a previous article.

Choosing to prioritize things that make you feel good is a great way to give yourself a store of positive emotion to help you get started, said Dr. Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Centre, an independent research organization based in Newport Beach, California.

The **next** step for Brooks is putting his phone away at meals. Parents get frustrated when their kids have their faces buried in their phones around the dinner table, but children often mirror what their parents are doing, he said. Gathering around a meal is an important bonding opportunity, he said. Even if the phone is face down on the table or tucked in your pocket, your brain knows that a notification can ding or there is an opportunity to look away from the company and find a funny video. And people deeply need those regular moments of connecting with others, Brooks said.

Lastly, he puts his phone away an hour before bed.

Just as in the morning, the light and content on your phone can be disruptive, but this time it hurts getting good sleep, said Dr. Shalini Paruthi, an adjunct professor of internal medicine and paediatrics at St. Louis University School of Medicine and spokesperson for the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, in an earlier article.

“Ideally, a bedtime routine includes winding down, relaxing, and helping the brain transition from a ‘go-go-go’ state to a more calm, ready to fall asleep state,” she said. “Having a phone at the bedside makes it really easy to roll over and start scrolling.”

Outside of better sleep quality, putting your phone away at the end of the day gives you an opportunity to spend time with the things and people who matter to you, Brooks said.

“Just that — first hour, mealtimes, last hour — your life’s going to change,” he said.