

Men Won't Let Go of Their Phones While Peeing Maybe they're bored. Maybe they're anxious. Maybe it's both.

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Bathroom reading is a sacred, time-honored tradition. Toilet-side literary entertainment has been a mainstay in homes for thousands of years: The ancient Romans kept libraries in their communal baths, and in the 18th century, Philip Stanhope, the fourth Earl of Chesterfield, wrote that someone he knew was “so good a manager of his time that he would not even lose that small portion of it which the call of nature obliged him to pass in the necessary-house; but gradually went through all the Latin poets, in those moments.” (I highly recommend this [excellent 2006 piece](#) in the *New York Times* about the history of bathroom reading — you know where you can read it.)

Today, the phenomenon has broadened to include not only the more time-consuming activity of pooping, but also the swift chore that is peeing at a urinal. Having never used a urinal myself, I do not have firsthand knowledge of the behavior, but male sources have informed me that staring into a glowing screen while standing at one is a growing trend.

“I have a nervous bladder.”

But a number-one is, of course, quicker than a number-two. Peeing takes [21 seconds](#), on average, for all mammals, from an elephant to a mouse. That's barely enough time to read an entire email, let alone respond to a text message, theoretically one-handed. So what compels these dudes to whip out their iPhones before doing their business?

Anxiety, as it turns out, is a big reason.

This is the case for Travis, a Las Vegas-based video editor who requested only his first name be used because of the sensitivity of the topic. “I have really bad public restroom anxiety, so sometimes I have to do this to redirect my brain and trick it into letting me pee when there are other people around,” he says. “It is usually pretty effective, especially if there are other things going on in the restroom, too. It's not like a magic cure, but it definitely assists.”

“I have a nervous bladder. Reddit/my phone provides the perfect distraction to help me go a little more quickly,” wrote one reddit user [in a thread](#) dedicated to the topic.

It is, apparently, a relatively common tactic for people with “paruresis,” or what might be more easily understood as “shy bladder syndrome.” There are very few studies on the condition — which makes it difficult or impossible for people to pee in certain situations — and much of what we know about it is based on case studies and anecdotes. It is occasionally discussed in the paruresis subreddit, where sufferers of the disorder go to commiserate. “Using my phone is a good distraction for helping to pee, does anyone else rely on this?” asked u/dannyboy211098 in a post from earlier this year. “I'm worried I literally can't go without my phone now, which is scary for when there will be situations where I can't scroll through social media as a distraction.” I can absolutely relate to this; as a sufferer of intense generalized and social anxiety disorder, it's likely that, on the off chance that I'm seen at a party, I'll be [nose-deep in Instagram](#). While using your phone to allay occasional stress can be helpful, depending on it to get through anxiety-inducing tasks — like socializing or peeing — isn't a healthy long-term habit.

“Using your smartphone is more like a crutch. Distraction techniques such as this can be useful in helping one escape the immediate anxiety in the moment, and in this case, possibly allow them to urinate successfully,” says David Shanley, a psychologist in Denver who treats paruresis. “However, it is not dealing with the issue, it is side-stepping the issue.”

Shanley recommends the “exposure method” — and no, not that kind of exposure. Rather, if peeing in public makes you anxious, deal with it head on. Leave your phone behind, and let yourself stare at the blank wall in front of you until you can finally relieve yourself. It isn’t the fastest way to use the restroom, but it is a more quick and efficient way of dealing with the problem as a whole, according to Shanley.

Much of the time, though, it’s not that the urinal user has a problem peeing effortlessly — it’s that they’re addicted to their phones and are unable to rip their eyes from a screen for even a second. That “addiction,” in turn, leads to even more anxiety, as some urinal phone users are ashamed about their habit.

Allen, an engineer based in Massachusetts, says he uses his phone at the urinal, though he knows “it’s embarrassing.” When I ask him what he feels is embarrassing about it, he says it’s because it illustrates his greater phone addiction issue. “I suspect my addiction is related to broader anxiety issues,” he tells me. “I genuinely use my phone as an avenue of personal validation so I can’t help but use it to get a quick hit from Instagram or Twitter.”

Jonathan Hamilton, who’s based in Raleigh, North Carolina and runs a [hilarious block list](#), says his urinal phone use is relatively recent. “I have to say I didn’t start until last year and have had a smartphone since 2009,” he says. “I don’t know what changed other than being more active on Twitter.”

Anecdotally speaking, there’s something to this: When I have Twitter on my phone, I’m much more likely to stare at it constantly than when I only have Instagram. Social media is, obviously, designed to be [habit-forming](#), though scientists [still debate](#) just how “addictive” or harmful it is. Still, there’s no question that it can certainly feel that way when we can’t even put our phones down long enough for a 21-seconds-long piss. And that, in turn, can lead to some pretty hilarious scenarios.

“Texting at the urinal? Really, dude?”

“I’m bad at my phone and take accidental screenshots a lot, which makes the camera noise,” says Sean, a New York-based video producer who also requested that only his first name be used. “I’ve had more than one mortifying incident where someone else was like washing their hands and must’ve thought I took a pic of myself peeing. Sometimes when someone comes in I quickly put my phone away which looks worse.” Andrew, a “tech bro but one of the good ones” based in San Francisco, says he once had someone comment on his urinal phone use — his boss. “Texting at the urinal? Really, dude?” is what Andrew tells me his boss said. “He’s the only person who could get away with it. Because saying something would break the iron law of the men’s room, which is to never speak.”

For Aaron, a New York-based designer, the whole practice is just disgusting, which is why he’s so ashamed that he does it. “You’re standing shoulder-to-shoulder with another person, piss splashing and misting in the air. And while this is happening you’re holding onto your \$649 smartphone with a fabric (!) case that you’re going to pull out during dinner later.” (Aaron has a Pixel phone that comes with a fabric case.) “I have no idea why Google’s official Pixel case is fabric but it feels like a piss sponge.”

Quinn Myers, in a piece for [Dollar Shave Club](#), wrote a fantastic defense of the urinal phone user. As a woman who doesn’t use urinals, my opinion on the matter may not be as valuable as his, but even still, I have to say I disagree. Because it seems to me that if using a cell phone at the urinal:

- Potentially worsens paruresis, or shy bladder
- Contributes to smartphone addiction
- Is disgusting because of germs
- Weirds other people out

Then it seems wise to leave the phone behind, or at least in your pocket, when you’re at the urinal. Those Slack messages, or incredible Twitter thread, can wait 21 seconds. Maybe you’ll find the blankness of the wall in front of you mentally refreshing. Your mind could use a break!