

Sherry Turkle, PhD — Social Psychologist

PLUGGED IN, YET MORE ALONE

"Mr. Watson, come here. I want to see you," said Alexander Graham Bell — rather famously — to an assistant on a new invention called the telephone in 1876.

Since then, communications has come a very long way, leading some researchers to ask: Does social technology enhance our personal relationships or detract from them?

According to social psychologist Sherry Turkle, PhD, and author of "Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other," the answer is both.

DIGITAL DOWNSIDES

"Some people use social networks to keep up with real friendships, to keep them lively and up-to-date," says Turkle, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Turkle interviewed 300 children and 150 adults to understand how digital social networks and the texting culture are transforming the way people relate to their parents, friends and community.

At the same time, digital technology "can provide the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship, without the demands of intimacy," Turkle says.

Through her research studies and interviews, Turkle concluded that an over-reliance on digital communication can result in feelings of real-world isolation and loneliness, emotional disconnection, anxiety and mental exhaustion.

The impact is often felt among children who must compete with digital devices for their parents' attention.

"Children say they try to make eye contact with their parents and are frustrated because their parents are looking down at their smartphones when they come out of school or after-school activities," says Turkle.

The research also shows that over-reliance on social technology may be causing us to become disconnected from our sense of self.

"When they're always connected, children, adolescents and adults become dependent on the presence of others for validation in the most basic ways," says Turkle. "They start to need other people to feel validated and they cannot approach others as full, individual, differentiated people."

A DEMAND FOR SOLITUDE

Following one of her interviews with a college student, Turkle observed her subject check his phone after the session was complete. He had 100 new messages (mostly texts). She perceived that he was overwhelmed by his responsibility to connect to every one of the people who had sent those messages.

In fact, a number of people Turkle interviewed are overloaded with digital communication and are focusing on ways to take time off from technology.

Her hope is that more people realize the need for real-world interpersonal skills — and solitude.

"It's a great psychological truth that if we don't teach our children how to be alone, they will always be lonely," Turkle says. "I think it's important to teach the next generation the importance of walking in nature and in the city, and focusing on those experiences. I am concerned about losing touch with the realities of our physical surroundings. I am concerned about losing touch with the kind of solitude that refreshes and restores."



"As we ratchet up the volume and velocity of our communication, we set up a pace that takes us away from each other."

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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