

Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?

Some say social media keeps us connected. Others argue that it breeds loneliness.

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YES The idea behind Facebook is to make us feel connected all the time. But in my research, interviewing hundreds of teens about what life with Facebook is like day-to-day, I've found that things are more complex.

Technology, it turns out, has made being alone seem like a problem that needs solving. When young people are alone, even for a minute or two, they feel the need to connect, to get on Facebook or some other social network or text service and chat. But in connecting, they often end up feeling more isolated. Why? Because by being in constant connection, we lose the capacity to feel content in our own company.

When we are constantly connected, we lose the capacity to feel content in our own company.

If you don't learn how to be alone, you'll only know how to be lonely. If you can't be content by yourself, without being compelled to constantly connect, you lose the ability to think your own thoughts and be ready to share them in conversation, in collaboration, and in a friendship.

The key to avoiding loneliness is the quality of our social interactions, not the quantity. Research shows that a lot of online communication with

little substance can sometimes make us feel more alone.

Facebook can help us keep in touch with our friends, but we too often use it as a substitute for spending face-to-face time with them. And since we feel the need to keep up with them online, we don't find moments of solitude where we can gather our thoughts and learn to be alone. This is perhaps the greatest cost of constant connection. •

—SHERRY TURKLE

Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

NO Facebook connects more of us to more of our friends and family in more places than we have ever been connected before. Every "Like" we hit, every "Share" we press, every comment we post is a way for us to renew—on a tiny scale—our connections with our friends.

Yes, Facebook is a huge time sink—maybe the biggest ever. Many people post useless or inappropriate stuff. And seeing too much of your show-offy friends' lives can make you jealous, but it won't make you lonely.

Of course, for some people watching their friends jet-skiing and going on dates might make them more conscious of the gaps in their own lives. But anyone who feels bad about that is also likely to feel bad about watching happy couples in the street. Blaming Facebook is just a crutch.

A former student of mine, who is back in New York after living abroad for a decade, told me that Facebook eased her transition. The first time she moved back to New York from another stint abroad, she felt disconnected from her family and friends. Now, because of the steady stream of photos and status updates, she knew what was happening with her friends all along.

It's become fashionable to blame all kinds of problems on technology. People have shorter attention spans? Blame the Internet. Kids' writing skills have weakened? Blame instant messaging. We're more lonely? Blame Facebook. That's ridiculous. In the end, social media only amplifies who you are in real life. If you tend to be lonely in real life, you will be lonely online as well. Don't blame Facebook for that. •

—SREE SREENIVASAN

Chief Digital Officer, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Social media only amplifies who you are in real life; if you're lonely, you'll be lonely online too.