

# An Assault on Empathy



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**Human relationships are rich, messy and demanding. When we clean them up with technology, we risk moving from conversation to mere connection.**

Recent research shows that people are uncomfortable if left alone with their thoughts for as little as six minutes. In one experiment, people preferred to self-administer electroshocks rather than sit without a book or an electronic device. To make a bad pun, that choice is stunning, but not surprising. We all see that when people are alone in a supermarket line or at a stop sign, they can seem near panic just before they reach for a device. In this crisis of solitude, a crisis in our capacity for empathy begins. As we struggle to pay attention to ourselves, we struggle to pay attention to each other.

Executives text and read email during meetings, students text

during classes, parents text at dinner with their families or in the park with their children, while children, too, text each other rather than talk or for that matter, look at the sky or allow themselves to daydream. Now, there is a word in the dictionary called "phubbing." It means maintaining eye contact while texting. My students tell me that they do it all the time and it's not that hard.

We pay a high price for our divided attention. Research shows that even a silent phone disconnects us. If you put a phone on the table during lunch, it changes the conversation in two ways. First, the content of the conversation moves to lighter things. The phone is a symbol that we are

always potentially “elsewhere.”  
Second, people feel less invested in the conversation. We use technology to find ways around the risks of face-to-face conversation. But it’s there that empathy is born and intimacy thrives.

So it is not surprising that in the past 20 years, we’ve seen a 40 percent decline in the markers for empathy among college students (for example, in their ability to recognize the feelings of others in stories), a drop that researchers link to the presence of digital communications.

What makes the flight from conversation so appealing? Our phones promise that we can always be heard, that we can put our attention wherever we want it to be, and that we can present ourselves however we wish to be seen. Digital technology allows us to edit ourselves and keep others at a distance.

Human relationships are rich, messy and demanding. When we clean them up with technology, we risk moving from conversation to mere connection. And here we face a dilemma. It’s often when we stumble, or struggle for our words, or are silent, that we reveal ourselves most to each other and to ourselves. People tell me that a moment alone

or a moment of silence during a conversation becomes painful. They become problems to be solved — by technology.

We slip into thinking that always being connected is going to make us less lonely. But we are at risk because it is actually the reverse: If we are unable to be alone, we will be lonelier. If we don't teach our children to be alone, they will only know how to be lonely. It is only when you know how to gather yourself that you can hear what others are saying. Relationships depend on the capacity for solitude, as do productivity and creativity.

An executive at a Fortune 500 company shares this story:

*I tell my secretary to let me work on a presentation for three hours. I want my email disabled. I ask her to take my cellphone away from me. I tell her to let no calls through except for family emergencies. But three hours without connection are intolerable. I could barely concentrate on the presentation, I felt so anxious. I know this sounds crazy, but I felt panicky. I felt that no one cared about me, loved me. I couldn't concentrate.*

I'm not suggesting that we run away from our devices, just that we commit to a more self-aware relationship with them. We can design for our vulnerabilities: In

the workplace, we can commit to meetings where we give each other our full attention; we can create dedicated spaces for conversation and for solitude. In only a few days without screens, we begin to relearn the ability to identify the feelings of others. And we begin to relearn an appreciation for our own company.

Speaking, listening with attention and self-awareness are skills. They take practice and that practice can start now. We need conversation to connect to others and for those dialogues with self where we learn to know ourselves. For the failed connections of our digital world, it is the talking cure.

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