Questionnaire

**Alone in the crowd**

Sherry Turkle says social networking is eroding our ability to live comfortably offline.

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People today are more connected to one another than ever before in human history, thanks to Internet-based social networking sites and text messaging. But they’re also more lonely and distant from one another in their unplugged lives, says Massachusetts Institute of Technology social psychologist Sherry Turkle, PhD. This is not only changing the way we interact online, it’s straining our personal relationships, as well.

Turkle’s new book, “Alone Together” (Basic Books, 2011), explores the ways online social networks and texting culture are changing how people relate to society, their parents and friends.

The book is based on meta-analyses of individual and family studies and her own interviews with 300 children and 150 adults. Turkle maintains that people who choose to devote large portions of their time to connecting online are more isolated than ever in their non-virtual lives, leading to emotional disconnection, mental fatigue and anxiety.

The *Monitor* spoke to Turkle about her research and what it means for the Facebook generation.

**How has social networking through technology changed society the most?**

The most dramatic change is our ability to be “elsewhere” at any point in time, to sidestep what is difficult, what is hard in a personal interaction and go to another place where it does not have to be dealt with. So, it can be as simple as what happens when 15-year-olds gather for a birthday party. As anyone who has ever been 15 knows, there is a moment at such events when everyone wants to leave. Things get awkward. It is, however, very important that everyone stay and learn to get along with each other. These days, however, when this difficult moment comes, each 15-year-old simply retreats onto Facebook. Whether or not they physically leave the birthday party, they have “left.”

When teens tell me that they’d rather text than talk, they are expressing another aspect of the new psychological affordances of the new technology — the possibility of our hiding from each other. They say a phone call reveals too much, that actual conversations don’t give them enough control over what they want to say.

**Does social technology isolate people from the real world, or augment our personal relationships?**

Both. Some people do use social networks to keep up with real friendships, to keep them lively and up to date. There is, however, another trend in which people “friend” people they don’t know or where they are unsure of the nature of their connection. We Facebook-friend people who do not know their commitment to us and similarly, we are unsure of what commitment we have to them. They can, in fact, be more like “fans” than friends. But their presence can sustain us and distract us and make it less likely for us to look beyond them to other social encounters. They can provide the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship, without the demands of intimacy.

**How does that reduced intimacy cause problems in our relationships?**

We are tempted to give precedence to people we are not with over people we are with. People talk to me about their phones and laptops as the “place for hope” in their lives, the “place where sweetness comes from.” We text during dinner with our families. We text as we drive. We text when we are with our children in the playground. Children say they try to make eye contact with their parents and are frustrated because their parents are looking down at their smart phones when they come out of school or after school activities. Young men talk about how only a few years ago, their dads used to watch Sunday sports with them and during the station breaks or between plays, they used to chat. Now their fathers are too often checking their email during games. The young men I interview sometimes call it “the BlackBerry zone” when they speak of their fathers’ unavailability. For those who would object that it’s the same as reading a Sunday paper while you watch sports, it is not. We give another level of attentional commitment to our devices.

**What are some of the benefits of solitude and taking time off from technology?**

It’s a great psychological truth that if we don’t teach our children how to be alone, they will always be lonely. When they’re always connected, children, adolescents and adults become dependent on the presence of others for validation in the most basic ways. When people move from, “I have a feeling, I want to make a call” to “I want to have a feeling, I need to send a text,” something unfortunate happens to their relations with others. They start to need other people to feel validated and they cannot approach others as full, individual, differentiated people. Rather, other people are used, as what one might think of as part objects — spare parts to support a fragile self.

In a recent New York Times article, the founder of an online dating site (www.datemyschool.com) summed up the problem of his generation by saying that, “People in the 21st century are alone. We have so many new ways of communicating, yet we are so alone.”

**For young people who’ve never really known a world without social technology, how can you stress the importance of preserving a non-networked life?**

My guarded optimism about the future comes from the young people I speak with who already complain about having to perform a character on social networks. Living on social networks means performing one’s profile, and indeed multiple profiles, almost all the time. Young people complain of performance anxiety. Between performance exhaustion and the sense that they have never had their parents’ full attention, young people are in fact nostalgic for something they have never had.

One of the case studies in “Alone Together” that most moved me was the case of Sanjay, a 16-year-old whom I met for an interview. During the hour we met, Sanjay had put away his phone and laptop. After the interview was over, he took it out and he had over 100 new messages, most of them texts. He explained that some of these were from a girlfriend “in meltdown,” some of these were from a group of friends with whom he was starting a band.

As he collected his technology in order to begin to respond to these communications, Sanjay was clearly overwhelmed. He said, not particularly to me but more to himself, as a comment on his situation, “How long am I going to have to do this?” As we ratchet up the volume and velocity of our communication, we begin to set up a pace that takes us away from each other.

**Do men and women use social networking technology differently?**

In my own research, I find that men are more likely to be confrontational on social networking sites and women more likely to “stalk” (obsessively check people’s status updates and learn about them) and less likely to bully or be confrontational.

One gender element that did become apparent is that mothers are now breastfeeding and bottle-feeding their babies as they text. Of course, in feeding an infant, so much more is going on than giving nutrition to a baby. There is the emotional exchange on the most primitive level, the feeling of gratifying someone and being gratified in return. A mother made tense by text messages is going to be experienced as tense by the child. And that child is vulnerable to interpreting that tension as coming from within the relationship with the mother. This is something that needs to be watched very closely. It reminds me of something that has occurred to me often as I have done this research: Technology can make us forget important things we know about life.

**Do you have any strategies for getting away from technology and nurturing real-life relationships?**

I have some basic rules. I think of them as creating sacred spaces around certain activities. No technology at meals. I used to check email before my daughter came down to breakfast, but then I got into a “just let me finish this one last email before I make you breakfast” mode and she called me on it! So, no technology when I’m with my daughter or out with friends.

When my colleagues bring their phones to dinner and place them on the table, I sometimes tease them about the unlikeliness of “epistemological emergencies.” The idea that we should put each other on pause as though we were machines in order to attend to those who are not present has become commonplace. It needs to be examined. I don’t think that is how we want to treat each other.

Also, no technology when I’m taking time for myself in nature. I have a house on Cape Cod and I notice people walk the dunes with their eyes down, looking at their smart phones. I think it is 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 our losing touch with the realities of our physical surroundings. I am concerned about our losing touch with the kind of solitude that refreshes and restores

1. What is the argument that this author is making? Explain the evidence and reasoning that the author provides.
2. Do you agree with the argument laid out here? Can you see it in the world around you, and in your lives? Why or why not?
3. Ask your own level 3 question and answer it based on this argument.
4. Compare the arguments about cellphones to the world depicted in Brave New World. What aspects are similar? Are cellphones doing the same thing to us that the feelies and promiscuity does to the people in BNW? If so, how? If not, why not?