

Are you “Over-connected”?

By Dr. Derek Conte

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We are turning into a country of cell phone-dependent multitaskers: eating, walking and even driving. While talking to someone in the same room, we will use our phones to text! We feel compelled to do this “because we don’t want to miss something important!” But that “important something” is a very, very relative term. How important is it really to jump when that ringer goes off, firing our “battle-stations” brain wiring? How often has a phone’s obnoxious ring interrupted the peace at church, during dinner or an important interpersonal moment? ...and we actually answer it? Are we becoming unconsciously rude? Once, I was in line at the bank, quietly speaking on the phone, when an elderly lady behind me said it was rude to be using the phone in such a place. “Are we in a library or courtroom,” I wondered defensively to myself? But then I thought, “The lady was right.” My personal call invaded her world and her ability to have some private meditation. In the past I would have spent a few minutes in line quietly reflecting on my day and maybe even struck up a conversation with someone new, like the lady standing behind me. Are we masters of technology, or its servants? Truly, at what cost are we constantly connected?

On a recent NPR interview, a behavioral scientist discussed the implications of the unending stream of information entering our brains via cell phone, including internet browsing, e-mails, texts, scheduling, tweeting and photograph-taking. It is estimated that today we consume about three times the information we consumed in 1960 and that we visit an average of 40 web sites per day. Cell phone use in the car, even when using a headset, is more dangerous than talking with a passenger because the passenger also sees the road and can warn the driver of trouble and modulate his voice in heavy traffic or bad weather and tends to talk less at these times.

But are we really getting more done by multitasking? Yes, research seems to show. But the problem is that the brain needs some ‘down time’ in order to record and memorize what it has learned. If we are always “inputting” into our brains, we actually begin to lose information and creativity because retention and inspiration come when we are quiet. Constant interruptions to our tasks from the ringing and beeping of the phone create stress and raises cortisol levels, which inhibits memory and accurate thinking and drives down the immune system. Multitaskers are actually less efficient than they would be at just one task, losing effectiveness each time they switch tasks.

Significantly, the brain re-wires itself to make the things we do most often more efficient. This adaptive trait of the brain is known as neuroplasticity and it follows that changes in the way we use our brains might change the way our brains function. Could this contribute to the increases in attention deficit problems we see not only in children but in adults? Heavy use of video games increases the release of dopamine, a feel-good neurotransmitter that is associated with addictive behavior. The rapid-fire image changes in MTV videos and the highly-crafted sound bites used in news and commercials may shorten the receiver’s attention span --- something to ponder. In short, we need some ‘down time’ to save what we’ve learned and re-charge our brains. But just as importantly, to take time to reflect on our day and maybe strike up a conversation with the lady behind us in the bank line. This kind of easy exchange can bring us peace and a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves. Life is too short to miss the people in it.

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