

Study examines impact of texting on students' emotional well-being

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Sleep deprivation has long been considered a significant problem for college freshmen during their transition to campus life. Now, a new study by a Washington and Lee University psychology professor identifies another culprit when it comes to students and sleep problems: texting.

In an article in the latest edition of *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, Karla Murdock reported that texting was a direct predictor of [sleep](#) problems among first-year students in a study that examined links among interpersonal stress, text-messaging behavior, and three indicators of college students' health: burnout, sleep problems and emotional well-being.

Although the results of the study showed that the impact of texting on students' psychological well-being depended on the level of interpersonal stress they were already facing, more texting was associated with poorer sleep regardless of their previous level of stress.

The students in the study, all in their first year, answered questions that measured academic and social [burnout](#), emotional well-being and sleep problems. Murdock also asked them to estimate how many text messages they send and receive on an average day.

The study's findings on sleep were especially significant given the well-documented compromises in sleep that students experience throughout college, but especially in the first year. Several recent studies have shown

that 70 percent of college students receive less than the eight recommended hours of sleep. A 2007 survey by the American College Health Association concluded that 40 percent of students feel rested only two days a week.

To assess students' sleep quality, Murdock used the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index with minor modifications to fit the college sample. This is a widely-used instrument that measures multiple aspects of sleep quality such as sleep duration, the amount of time it takes to fall asleep, the amount of time actually spent sleeping while in bed, nighttime disturbances, and [daytime sleepiness](#).

The key finding was that a higher number of daily texts was associated with more [sleep problems](#). Murdock notes that this finding reinforces previous evidence pointing to a direct association between cell-phone use and poor sleep in adolescents and emerging adults.

Among the potential causes for this connection are two tendencies: students' feeling pressured to respond immediately to texts, no matter what time of day or night, and students' sleeping with the phone nearby, thus being awakened by the alerts from incoming texts.

Meantime, the study found that frequent text messaging was also associated with greater psychological vulnerability to interpersonal stress.

Murdock writes: "These correlational findings provide an initial indication that heavy text messaging could be problematic during times of stress. Although speculative, it could be argued that text messaging is a uniquely unsuitable mode of communication for coping with interpersonal stress in close relationships."

For instance, Murdock suggested, the abbreviated language that is

common in texting—so-called "textese"—lacks the ability to provide the kind of nuance that is important in discussing sensitive issues. In addition, texting fails to offer critical non-verbal cues that would be part of a face-to-face conversation.

"Text messaging may carry a high risk of producing or maintaining misunderstandings and/or unproductive interactions during periods of stress," she wrote. "When interpersonal stress involves conflict, the conditions required for productive communication may be particularly difficult to achieve through texting."

Murdock and her team of Washington and Lee undergraduate students are currently embarking on a new study to examine pathways through which cellphone is linked with compromises in college [students'](#) sleep.

Provided by Washington and Lee University

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