

Dealing with digital distraction

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Our digital lives may be making us more distracted, distant and drained, according to research presented at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association.

For instance, even minor phone use during a meal with friends was enough to make the diners feel distracted and reduced their enjoyment of the experience, one study found.

"People who were allowed to use their phones during dinner had more trouble staying present in the moment," said Ryan Dwyer, MA, of the University of British Columbia, lead author of a study that was presented during a symposium on how digital technology is affecting relationships. "Decades of research on happiness tell us that engaging positively with others is critical for our well-being. Modern technology may be wonderful, but it can easily sidetrack us and take away from the special moments we have with friends and family in person."

Dwyer and his colleagues conducted two studies—a field experiment in a restaurant and a survey. The restaurant experiment included more than 300 adults and university students in Vancouver, British Columbia. Participants were either asked to keep their phones on the table with the ringer or vibration on or to put their phones on silent and place them in a container on the table during the meal.

After eating, the participants filled out a questionnaire detailing their feelings of social connectedness, enjoyment, distraction and boredom, as well as the amount of phone use and what they did on their phones

during the meal.

The researchers found that people who had their phones easily accessible during the experiment not only used them more than those with their phones put away, but they also reported feeling more distracted and enjoyed the experience less.

The survey portion included more than 120 participants from the University of Virginia. Participants were surveyed five times a day for one week and were asked to report on how they were feeling and what they had been doing in the 15 minutes before completing the survey.

Results showed that people reported feeling more distracted during face-to-face interactions if they had used their smartphone compared with face-to-face interactions where they had not used their smartphone. The students also said they felt less enjoyment and interest in their interaction if they had been on their phone.

"The survey findings were especially notable because of the negative effects of phone use among university students, who are commonly known as digital natives," said Elizabeth Dunn, Ph.D., of the University of British Columbia and co-author of the study and symposium presenter. "We assumed that this generation would be more adept at multi-tasking between using their phones and interacting with others, but we found out even moderate levels of phone use undermined the benefits of engaging with others."

Another study presented in the session found that compassionate people spend less time on social media than people who are more self-centered and narcissistic.

In addition, people with lower [emotional intelligence](#), or those who have difficulty identifying, describing and processing their emotions, used

social media more often than those who are more in touch with their feelings, according to the study.

"People who are uncomfortable with their own and others' emotions may be more comfortable online," said Sara Konrath, Ph.D., of Indiana University. "We think that they may prefer text-based interactions that allow them more time to process social and emotional information."

This study built upon previous research that has shown that more narcissistic people use social media more often than less narcissistic people. Virtually no research has been done on how emotional intelligence relates to social media use, according to Konrath.

She and her colleagues analyzed data from four studies of more than 1,200 adult participants and used existing scales that assessed narcissism, empathy, emotional intelligence and emotion recognition. The studies also asked questions about how frequently participants checked and posted on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

More empathic people used Twitter less frequently than those who were not as caring and compassionate toward others, the researchers found. Also, people who were more likely to be able to see the world from another's perspective did not spend as much time on Facebook and Instagram. Another interesting finding was that people who scored high on a test of reading others' emotions used Twitter and Facebook less often.

Conversely, more [narcissistic people](#) and those who feel overwhelmed by the emotional experiences of others spent more time on all three social media sites.

"Does being more emotionally intelligent and empathic cause people to avoid social media, or are lower empathy people more drawn to it? It

could also be the opposite: Perhaps frequently using [social media](#) can impair empathy and emotional intelligence," said Konrath. "We cannot determine causality with this study. We need more research to better understand how online digital technology affects people, for better or for worse."

Other research presented found that pre-teens became better at reading non-verbal cues from their peers after five days with no screen time and college-age participants bonded better with their friends during in-person interactions versus video chat, audio chat or instant messaging.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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