Constant Connection is Killing Your Connections

Behind the quiet humming of the fans in my MacBook, my hand moved the curser instinctively to open the web browser and begin typing. It’s almost as if this action was programmed into me, like I, myself, was a robot and my primary function upon opening my laptop was to complete this task. It must have been sometime around 2013 when I became self-aware that every time I opened my computer, before I could even realize it, I was logging into Facebook. This wasn’t a phenomenon unique to my laptop though, I would soon recognize, but also every time I opened my phone I was checking my Facebook app. The idea that I was doing this everyday without thought, which would inevitably lead to hours of mindlessly clicking through Facebook pages, lead me to reevaluate the importance of social media in my life.

Technology has progressed in a way that has made it an inseparable part of our everyday lives, that being true for none more so than the smartphone. We use it to conduct business, communicate, for entertainment, and everything in between. With the rise of the smartphone, and the implementation of social media within it, we have never been more connected to each other than we are now. No matter where we are in the world we are always plugged in and one click, or button press, away from communicating with others. With this constant connection though, I couldn’t help but feel like it was taking something away from me. Although social media and smartphones have allowed us to stay connected in ways never before possible, I believe it has had far more of a negative impact on our relationships by distracting us, causing strain and
distrust in romantic relationships, negatively affecting parent-child relationships, and diminishing our face-to-face social skills.

The Digital Age has brought with it some of the greatest inventions in human history and forever changed the way we live our lives. In particular, these innovations have brought the world together like never before by allowing instant communication and connection. We are able to meet people we may never have had the chance to meet otherwise, build worldwide communities around common interests, or simply play a game with someone far away. Gone are the days of going on a trip and not being able to tell your family and friends about it until you return. We can simply send a day by day text of the events going on during our travels. We can send a video of the concert we’re at to the friend who couldn’t make it, or post it on social media for everyone to see. In times of emergency we can more easily get ahold of loved ones. I have even benefited personally from this worldwide connection by meeting my girlfriend, who lives in another country, through a language exchange app. Indeed, technology and social media have connected us in a way the world never thought possible and in doing that made it seem not so big. However, I believe this constant connection has been more of a detriment to our relationships and how we socialize. Relationships mean less, and we have too many of them. Do you really need to send a friend request to the person you sat next to in the third grade? It has skewed our perception on how relationships work and intensified tensions within them. Furthermore, being perpetually plugged in to the rest of the world means we are paying less attention to the relationships right in front of us.

When discussing the affect smartphones and social media have on our relationships the first, and most broad, issue that needs to be discussed is how it distracts us. Author and motivational speaker Simon Sinek, in a widely popular interview about millennials and
smartphone and social media use, said, “If you’re sitting in a meeting with people you’re supposed to be listening to and speaking, and you put your phone on the table, face-up or face-down… that sends a subconscious message to the room that ‘you’re just not that important to me right now’” (Sinek). Merely having your phone out when in social settings is not only a distraction to you but also to everyone else in the room, but these distractions aren’t limited to just the workplace. Forbes reports, in an article about social media and relationships, that a survey by the Pew Research Center found that, “25% of respondents claim that their spouse was too distracted with their phone when they were together” (Rohampton). The Chicago Tribune also reports that a “study by online security company AVG found that 54 percent of children thought their parents check their devices too often and 32 percent of kids feel unimportant when parents are distracted by their phones” (Braff). Whether it’s responding to work e-mails or checking our Facebook, the distraction of constantly being connected and having our smartphones on us at all times is having a negative impact on every relationship in our lives. Co-workers, romantic partners, and our children all notice and feel less important because we are constantly being distracted. This also means that we aren’t putting in the proper amount of attention and time to cultivate these bonds with others. The strain this causes on romantic relationships however, leads to even deeper issues than simply feeling like our partner is inattentive.

Building and maintaining a relationship with your significant other can already be a challenging task for varying reasons such as scheduling or distance, but social media adds unnecessary strain to the equation. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard the story that someone caught their boyfriend or girlfriend going through their phone, or had been caught themselves. The same article on Forbes reports that “Some 34% of women and 62% of men
admit to snooping on their partner’s text and other private messages” (Rohampton). With the rise of social media, and our ability to connect with anyone through our smartphone, this has become a common occurrence and cause for conflict in romantic relationships. Gwendolyn Seidman, an associate professor of psychology at Albright College, wrote in an article for Psychology Today that, “All the information on Facebook can create a sense of jealousy, suspicion, and uncertainty for coupled users. Many interactions on Facebook are ambiguous, as you may not know some of your partner’s Facebook friends or the nature of those relationships” and that social media “creates a negative feedback loop in which potential jealousy-provoking information leads to more partner surveillance” (Seidman). With partners having high numbers of online contacts and friends, some in the thousands, it’s impossible to keep track or even know why the relationship began. This leads to anxiety and suspicion, especially if we see a message that we believe is inappropriate or makes us uncomfortable. Dr. Seidman goes on to say that a study on high levels of Facebook use is linked to cheating and break-ups and was “generally the result of Facebook-related conflicts like contacting an ex-partner and constant partner monitoring” (Seidman). Not only has excessive amounts of social media use led to jealousy, but the monitoring brought on by this has itself led to further conflict. Additionally, the ease of contacting others, and hiding this contact, has emboldened some to give into temptations like contacting an ex-partner and cheating. Social media and smartphones aren’t only negatively impacting our romantic relationships though, but also our parenting.

The attention we give to our children, especially in their youngest years, is key to their development and in some cases, determines how they will interact in future relationships. I remember one morning in an IHOP waiting to be seated, there were two children running around being rambunctious as children usually are. As I and others looked around to see who the parents
of the kids were, I realized it was the women sitting next to me, completely consumed by feverous scrolling through her Facebook feed. Not only did she not realize her children were being disruptive, she didn’t seem to care. When parents are distracted with their smartphones and not showing the proper amount of attention, they are taking away form a crucial phase in a child’s development. Time published an article on Dr. Jenny Radesky, a pediatrician who specializes in child development, who conducted an observational study of parent-child interactions in public, stating, “The data provided an unvarnished look at how absorbed many parents were by their devices. One child reached over in an attempt to lift his mother’s face while she looked down at a tablet, but to no avail” (Park). The same year, NPR reported on Dr. Radesky’s findings, affirming, “Radesky says that’s a big mistake, because face-to-face interactions are the primary way children learn” (Neighmond). The constant distraction caused by our devices is taking away from our relationships with our children in a way that is detrimental to their development, but also causes further issues in affecting the way they behave.

The same NPR article continues by saying Dr. Radesky “found that kids with parents who were most absorbed in their devices were more likely to act out” (Neighmond). Children who aren’t receiving the proper amount of attention at home begin to act out in hopes of either getting the attention of their parents, or receiving it elsewhere. A few years later, Science Daily published further research by Dr. Radesky, stating, “Some parents also reported a trickle-down effect. Their emotional response to whatever they were reading on their mobile device… sometimes affected how they responded to their children” (University of Michigan Health System). Parent’s being distracted by their smartphones and other devices has led to a perpetual cycle that leads children to act out more, in which parents then lash out at their children, to then start the cycle anew by continuing to ignore their children. If we continue you to do this, children
will grow up lacking in social skills that are necessary in everyday life. We are already seeing the diminishing affects smartphones and social media are having on face-to-face interactions with adults from the current generation.

Addiction is a bold claim to make when discussing how the current generation, often referred to in a derogatory way as millennials, can’t seem to put away their phones or get off of social media, but there doesn’t seem to be any other way to describe it. A close friend of mine, who I’ve known since high school, seemed to have fallen into this dilemma at one point. One memory that always sticks out is when a large group of our friends had planned for weeks to meet up for dinner, as we hadn’t gotten together in a while. As we sat around talking and laughing, we couldn’t help but notice our friend with his face stuck in his phone. His attention would never leave it for more than a few minutes, and the phone would never be put completely away. Similar occurrences with my friend would take place in future social gatherings, as if he had forgotten how to socialize or converse. Lori Ann Wagner, in an article on smartphones and relationships, writes “There is a concern that since the advent of the smartphone, obsessions with texting, updating statuses, and using Snapchat are sounding the death knell for real conversation” (Wagner 116). Our ability to hold conversations with any substance is diminishing as we are distracted by the lives we build through social media and in our smartphones. Furthermore, even though our face-to-face social skills are lacking, we still believe we are being social because we are using social media. Dr. Alex Lickerman, writing for Psychology Today, states, “The problem, however, comes when we find ourselves subtly substituting electronic relationships for physical ones or mistaking our electronic relationships for physical ones” (Lickerman). We are letting our online lives replace the need for actual social interaction which, as social creatures, is a skill we must learn to develop.
With the ability to have and always be connected to thousands of friends and followers on social media, it’s hard to argue we are being less social. However, Forbes reported that “a study found that more friends on social media doesn’t necessarily mean you have a better social life” and that “there seems to be a cap on the number of friends a person’s brain can handle, and it takes actual social interaction (not virtual) to keep up these friendships” (Walton). We are building a large catalogue of friendships that are a lot less meaningful and mostly superficial. We lack the capacity to even maintain so many relationships, and it’s destroying our ability to connect in a meaningful way face-to-face. Wagner continues by writing, “face-to-face communications give us something we lose in mediated communications: the ability to engage our five senses simultaneously” (Wagner 116). When our capability to have direct conversations with others declines, we also dull our ability to pick up on social cues or read emotions. Being social animals, this skill is immensely important for our ability to build and nurture relationships, understand how our words have affected another party, or simply read between the lines when conversing with others. When genuine laughter is replaced by “lol” and other acronyms, we cheapen our ability to engage our senses in real conversation and pick up on the emotional cues of friends and family, likening us closer to computers than animals. Luckily for my friend, he was able to recognize how his constant use of his phone and social media was detrimental to the relationships around him, and found a balance in understanding the time and place to be social and the time and place to be social online.

Smartphones and social media have accomplished tremendous feats in terms of changing how we connect with each other, and stay connected. Not matter where we are in the world we are no more than a button press away from our friends and loved ones. Constantly being plugged in, though, has distracted us from the people we care about, caused distress in our love lives,
harmed our interactions with our children, and dwindled our ability to socialize offline. Simon Sinek says in his interview, “Alcohol is not bad, too much alcohol is bad. Gambling is fun, too much gambling is dangerous… there’s nothing wrong with social media and cell phones, it’s the imbalance” (Sinek). Like so many other aspects in life, balance is the key to maintaining a healthy and productive existence. In the United States we tend to be a culture of overconsumption and excessiveness. No matter what our pursuits in life we must learn balance, and compromise, as this is what our nation was originally founded on. Constantly being connected is killing our relationships, not because its destructive in and of itself, but because we depend upon it too much.