

This is Your Mind on Media: Staying Sane in a Crazy Culture

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Before our program starts, I'd like to remind you to please turn off your cell phones and pagers."

Does this common announcement make you uneasy about being out of cell-phone range? Do you have the itch to check your email on days when your laptop's inaccessible? When you're supposed to be getting work done at your computer, do you find yourself repeatedly checking on-line to see the latest news, sports, stock prices, or political gaffes? Are you watching more TV but enjoying it less, and finding it more stressful than diverting? In short, are your communication habits making you feel more connected and in control – or are they controlling *you* and stressing you out?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you're not alone. How our lives have changed over the past 50 odd years! When I was a teenager in the 1950's, we had one TV in the living room that we all watched together; we had one phone that we shared, and if someone called while we were out, well, they just had to try again; we had radios and record players, but we only used them at home; and, of course, we didn't have computers.

Flash forward to now: When my son and his roommate moved into their freshman dorm last year, they brought with them two cell-phones, two ipods, two computers, two printers, one videogame console and one TV! And when I'm on campus and see mobs of students walking between classes, most of them are talking on their cell phones. Although all these new technologies have brought conveniences, they are not without their unwanted side-effects. Two years ago, my best friend's daughter, who works in investment banking, couldn't wait to show me her prized new Blackberry that was a perk of her job. A year later when I saw her, it had become her *cursed* Blackberry, which she felt was responsible for the fact that work now intruded on her life 24/7.

Why are all the electronic inputs into our lives so stressful? Why can't we just take or leave all these messages that are coming at us from every direction? And why does this barrage of inputs stay with us, leaving our nerves jangled and our thoughts racing?

One area of insight into our reactions may come from recent findings in neuroscience, research that studies how the brain and body respond to the inputs it receives. For example, research on "mirror neurons" suggests that when we watch other people engage in behavior (even when the other people are on screen), the part of our brain that plans and prepares to perform that same activity is activated. As another example, research on emotional memory suggests that really intense fear reactions are stored deep in the brain "indelibly." Findings like these can help people understand that when they're experiencing things electronically through our many gadgets, they are not simply passively receiving information. What they're seeing and hearing is becoming part of them.

There is much research on the effects of stress on our physical as well as psychological well-being. A recent article in *JAMA* confirms that stress contributes to anxiety, depression, cardiovascular disease, and other illnesses. And recent newspaper articles have noted the need to take a break from connectivity for the sake of our sanity. One *New York Times* writer spoke of his techno-addiction and reported on the benefit of his weekly sabbatical from connectivity.

Learning to balance connectivity with serenity can be a challenge, but it can be helped by a healthy dose of off-line activities, like communing with nature, reading a book, doing crosswords, or even cooking (without the media droning on in the background). It may sound simple, but for many of us, unplugging from beeps, screens, and ringtones can be harder than you think.

References

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