Chapter 17

Constantly Connected: Managing Stress in Today’s Technological Times

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ABSTRACT

As society has transitioned from landlines to iPhones, people find themselves connected to their mobile devices 24/7. While the advantages of new technologies have led to constant availability, it has also led to additional stress and disconnection. For example, how many times have you seen a group of people out to dinner but they are all looking at their phones and not at each other? The problem is not the technology; instead, people need better coping strategies to deal with stress and the constant flood of information. This chapter will address the health consequences of stress and provide suggestions for how people can deal with stress in their lives. It will also illustrate the need for connection and the value of people being their authentic selves instead of portraying an image for social media.

INTRODUCTION

It is not yet five in the morning. My alarm goes off, and as I reach over to shut it off, I grab my iPhone from my bedside table. I check the texts I received since I went to sleep, then check my email. I haven’t even been awake for two minutes, but already I am typing a reply to a coworker that can certainly wait until I’ve had breakfast. My mind is racing thinking of my endless to do list before my feet even hit the floor. The tone has been set for the day, and I’m not sure it’s a good one.

Technology has made the world a better place by connecting people. My out of state relatives are only a text message away, and we can send each other pictures on our phones to bridge the distance between us. I love research, and when looking up information for this chapter, as much as I love the feeling of books in my hands, it is comforting to know there is a wealth of information that is only a mouse click away when I type key words into a search engine. The flip side of the advantages of technology, however, is that we as a society are constantly connected. This constant connection can bring a feeling of stress.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2838-8.ch017
When my parents were my age, they had a landline to call people. Before the invention of answering machines, if someone wasn’t home, a call was missed. Even with an answering machine, my parents had to wait until they got home to know who called them. Their dinners at restaurants and trips to the movies were not disturbed by phone calls. Granted, they were difficult to reach if there was ever an emergency, but true emergencies are few and far between. My parents could actually look into each other’s eyes at dinner. How many times have my friends and I been at a restaurant and everyone is looking at their cell phones instead of each other? When my parents were my age, if they were gone when a favorite television show was on, they missed it. Thanks to the invention of the VCR, they could record their favorite shows, but only one show at a time. Members of my generation tend to get overwhelmed by the volume of television shows and all the recording options. When my parents were my age, it may be difficult to fathom they lived in a world without social media or email. My mom wrote handwritten letters to her family and friends. My dad left work at the office and the only inbox he ever had to check was the paper one on his desk. Email brings people together while simultaneously making it difficult to disconnect. How many times have I been distracted by the ping of an email? How many times have I been misled by someone’s social media post because that person wants to present a constructed persona instead of an authentic self? Recently, I visited a friend’s high school classroom. The students asked us how we communicated before social media. My friend and I attempted to explain going to high school football games and meeting friends in the college dining hall and were met with blank stares from the teenagers in her classroom. I found myself thinking of this question: How do you cope when the incredible gift of technology concurrently brings stress?

This chapter represents an ongoing odyssey to navigate the world of technology and the concurrent stress that sometimes accompanies it. Technology itself is not stressful; it’s the reaction by people to the technology that often creates stress. This chapter will be presented in the form of a narrative and will explore different dimensions of this topic such as the author’s temporary technology fast, observations of stress in college students, and research from the fields of medicine and education that provide the theory behind the practice of stress management.

FIRST PERSON NARRATIVE INQUIRY

In order for you as the reader to comprehend my personal experiences with technology, I present this chapter in the form of a narrative inquiry. Narratives are subjective, as each person views his or her story through the lens of experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue, “in narrative thinking, interpretations of events can always be otherwise” (p. 31). Asking questions and finding themes in stories involves inquiry. Narrative inquiry is the qualitative interpretive field of research where researchers find narrative threads in stories that reflect themes. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) elaborate, “try to understand a narrative unity as a thread or theme that runs through the narrative of experience and that provides a way to see how the rules, principles, images, and metaphors relate one to the other as they are called out by the practical situations in which we find ourselves” (p. 75). In other words, when a person shares a story, he or she selects what details to share or not to share. For example, to share every detail would make this writing much longer than a chapter, so details that enhance the theme of the chapter appear here and contribute to the narrative thread that runs through each vignette. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the process of converting informal field texts into a formal research text by stating, “we find ourselves frequently engaged in writing a variety of different kinds of interim texts, texts situated...