

MAINTAINING FULFILLING RELATIONSHIPS  
IN AN ERA OF TECHNOLOGICAL COMMUNICATION

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
Quality Versus Quantity.....	5
Technology’s Effect on Solitude.....	7
Changing Conversations.....	12
Decline of Empathy.....	17
Listening to Others.....	21
Misunderstanding Messages.....	24
Surface-Level Relationships.....	25
Vulnerability.....	27
Authenticity.....	30
Tying It All Together.....	32
III. MOVING FORWARD.....	34
Choosing a Medium.....	34
Having Difficult Conversations.....	35
Effective Face-to-Face Communication.....	37
Effective Digital Communication.....	39
Baby Steps.....	42
REFERENCES.....	46

## ABSTRACT

Technology has become increasingly prevalent in our lives, and some of its effects can be seen in the declining quality of our relationships. As we have adapted to technology, we have moved our relationships primarily to the online world instead of regularly communicating face-to-face. This has affected the ways in which we relate to one another, especially regarding our conversation styles, our capacity for solitude, and our levels of empathy, vulnerability, and authenticity. However, through conscious awareness of how our minds and relationships have changed, we can take concrete action each day in order to develop more authenticity, vulnerability, and intimacy with those around us. We can learn to practice active listening, spend time in silence, pay attention to our unconscious thought patterns, and even attend counseling if more extreme measures are required. In applying these steps, we can achieve more fulfilling relationships with our friends, partners, family members, and anyone else that we interact with on a regular basis.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Technology is rising among college-aged students, with a Gallup study (2015) citing them as the most frequent smartphone users among adults. One study reported that seven out of ten young adults check their phones at least once an hour (Newport, 2015). In another study, more than half of teens and young adults reported that they check their phone “all the time,” even though “every 15 minutes” was one of the options they could choose (Rosen, 2012). Seventy percent of Millennials said they use their mobile devices from the moment they wake up to the moment they go to bed (McCoy, 2016), and young adults have a higher daily usage of Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram than any other age bracket (Duggan, 2015). Young adults are more connected than ever before, but what are the ramifications of this new technological lifestyle?

Although some may assume that greater connection correlates with higher levels of satisfaction, studies are showing the contrary; Jenaro et al. (2007) found that students with problematic cell phone overuse were more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and social dysfunction (as cited in Rosen, 2012). In addition, higher rates of internet usage are significantly correlated with higher stress, anxiety, and depression (Younes et al., 2016). Although young adults are experiencing more connection with technology, our increasing overuse has led to mental health problems.

The higher rates of anxiety and depression among young adults has led to an upward trend in visits to counseling centers, with a 231% increase in yearly visits at the Franciscan University Counseling Center between 2000 and 2015 (Beiter et al., 2015). College students appear to be experiencing a mental health epidemic, but what role does technology play? Depression is strongly linked to the quality of one’s relationships (Teo,

Choi, & Valenstein, 2013) and higher internet usage leads to lower quality relationships (Sanders, Field, Diego, & Kaplan, 2000). As technology becomes more prevalent in our lives, we must examine not just how it has impacted our own minds, but how the psychological changes have impacted our relationships with those around us. As our relationships deteriorate, so do our levels of fulfillment and satisfaction.

In his book *iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us*, Dr. Larry Rosen (2012) claims that technology usage triggers symptoms of psychological disorders such as narcissism, obsessive-compulsive disorder, addiction, depression, ADHD, and social phobia. Although the symptoms are not severe enough to classify as a real disorder, traits of these psychological problems seem to be exacerbated by overuse of technology. Thus, he refers to them as “iDisorders.” He suggests that although we are not clinically diagnosed, the psychological changes that we experience from using smartphones too frequently can mimic real mental health issues. As our minds begin to lean towards disordered tendencies, we unconsciously change the way we interact with the people around us and our relationships can suffer the consequences.

Technology is becoming an addiction, and addictions can negatively impact our lives and relationships. Wright (2004) calls technology a “soft addiction,” defining the term as “habitual activities... that numb our feeling, sap our life force, and lock us into a limbo of muted experience” (p. 3). Smartphones seem harmless while texting friends and receiving drug-like “hits” of connection, but when we notice how much energy and time we devote to our phones, we can see that the addictive quality prevents us from being able to obtain greater fulfillment and deeper human connection.

Multiple researchers are discovering that social media and texting are not inherently bad, but the ways in which we are becoming accustomed to using them is creating deeper problems within our lives and our relationships. In a study at Harrisburg College in Pennsylvania, only 10% of students were able to go for a week without social media. They were still allowed to text and use other forms of communication, but the students claimed that it was too difficult to survive the full week without being connected through Facebook or Instagram (Rosen, 2012). Although we try to advocate for balance and moderate usage, the level to which our phones are ingrained into our lives continues to rise. Phones and social media are mainly used for communication, so their strongest impact is within the realm of our relationships.

Various researchers have explored technology's effects on our relationships, but few have dived deeply into the underlying causes and offered practical solutions to create a more fulfilled and engaged life. Sherry Turkle is one of the more famous authors regarding the subject, but her main advice is simply to have more face-to-face conversations. While this is extremely important, I want to go beyond that to look at the psychological changes we have experienced and explore how to be more conscious of ourselves and others during our interactions. It is true that technology has many benefits; texting and social media have brought about more efficiency, more ways to stay in contact, more channels to meet new people, and social outlets for people who feel isolated. I am not arguing that we should abstain from technology completely. Rather, I want to offer a new perspective on how our lives have been influenced by our new modes of communication so that we can become more aware of ourselves and our relationships.

I begin with an extensive literature review examining the effects of using technology to communicate, including communication overwhelm, lack of solitude, fragmented conversation styles, the decline of empathy, listening skills, misunderstandings over text, and whether we have developed surface-level relationships. I also discuss our decreasing levels of vulnerability and authenticity. For clarity, I want to provide the reader with key definitions of the terms and ideas that I will be implementing throughout this paper. Technology is mainly used to refer to smartphones, because they provide the largest form of technological communication. More specifically, I am referring to our social media apps and text messages. As I discuss “relationships” throughout this paper, I am referring primarily to close connections with friends or romantic partners, although the term may also be extended to include family members or people we see and talk to on a regular basis. Vulnerability is defined in this paper as our willingness to make mistakes and take emotional risks with others, and authenticity is defined as our willingness to express our raw, unfiltered self and reveal intimate or uncomfortable aspects of ourselves to others.

After outlining pre-existing research and the inferences to be gathered from it, I will discuss more practical advice to improve the quality of our relationships and feel more connected to the people around us. The goal of this thesis is to provide insight into the changes we have experienced within our relationships due to technology, and to examine the ways in which we might create and maintain more fulfilling connections within our lives.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the following chapter I will present the existing literature around technology's impact on both our personal psyche and our relationships, providing a framework to understand how it has affected our lives. In order to offer a comprehensive examination, I have reviewed over fifty books and articles that discuss the subject at hand. Through understanding the research that has already been done, we can become more conscious in our daily lives by implementing a critical perspective to analyze our behavior. I will begin by discussing the effects of the sheer amount of technology we use and how our minds have adapted, then gradually move into discussion of our conversation styles to provide concrete examples of how our relationships have shifted to accommodate our technological comfort zone. Finally, I will go deeper into exploring how our authenticity and vulnerability, two crucial elements for genuine connection and fulfilling relationships, have changed due to our technological communication.

### **Quality Versus Quantity**

When we examine how technology affects relationships, the first assumption is usually that higher levels of connection create more friendships and provide easier mechanisms through which to maintain them. However, although it is true that we have more access to more people, one of the issues of constantly being connected is that we can start to feel overwhelmed. The pressure to always be plugged in and communicating with one another can lead to strain in our relationships because we do not have the luxury of spending enough time apart.

Young adults feel a social pressure to be constantly connected to one another, even saying that the speed of a response to a message indicates the importance of the relationship (Standlee, 2016). If we are too busy in our real lives to respond to our digital lives, our relationships suffer. We demonstrate that the relationship is a priority by constantly being connected and available, but this can force us to invest more time and energy into the relationship than we would like. A study by MTV found that 66% of young adults found it “exhausting to always be ‘on,’” and students have reported that it is hard to balance out the need for space with the expectations of their friends (Taylor, 2011). The energy expenditure to maintain relationships is getting higher as we create more mediums to stay connected, so we develop fewer close relationships. Although we have access to more people and more methods of connecting, the emotional toll that it takes to constantly communicate means that we only have the time and energy to invest in a small number of people.

Why do we feel compelled to spend so much time connecting through technology, instead of just sending a quick text and then returning to our day? Part of the reason is because conversations through a technological medium require more time to get the same feeling of connection that a short, face-to-face conversation would be able to provide. For instance, the information and emotions generated over an hour of texting would probably have similar results to a five- or ten-minute conversation in the real world. So, as we move our relationships from primarily in person to more frequently through technology, there is an increased barrage of communication as we try to maintain the same levels of intimacy and connection that we had in person.

Once we become constantly available in a friendship, we cannot just disconnect without the risk of damaging the friendship's expectations. Studies show that "using mobile phones in close relationships increased expectations of relationship maintenance through mobile phones" (Hall & Baym, 2012). This means that we can only increase levels of mobile communication instead of decreasing them. The increasing maintenance of a relationship through cell phones significantly predicts overdependence, however, leading to a decrease in satisfaction and increasing feelings of entrapment, guilt, and pressure (Ibid).

As we become more overwhelmed with our online communication, we need to make time for solitude. Solitude provides us with the space we need to focus on our own thoughts instead of getting swept away in someone else's life. However, even our capacity for spending time alone has been changed by the prevalence of technology in our lives.

### **Technology's Effect on Solitude**

To begin to understand how technology has affected the quality of relationships between young adults, one must first examine how it has affected our relationships with ourselves. In his book *The End of Absence*, Michael Harris (2014) explores the idea that with modern technology, we no longer have a sense of absence in our lives. This refers specifically to our sense of solitude and stillness, where we can have quiet moments to reflect and think in between onslaughts of external stimuli. He argues that instead of filling this precious time with our own quiet thoughts, we turn to smartphones to continue the stream of stimuli with online media. We now have the ability to be constantly

engaged and connected, and taking a break from this ceaseless stimulation requires a conscious effort.

While the original intent for using smartphones in between activities may have been simply to escape boredom, our over-usage seems to have crossed a line between deciding to use them in certain moments to an inability to live without them. We no longer make the effort to practice solitude or actively engage in it, and thus we have forgotten how to handle it altogether. This phenomenon was observed in a study on disengagement, where participants were asked to sit alone in a room with a choice between doing nothing or receiving electric shocks (Wilson et al., 2014). Although they all reported beforehand that they would rather do nothing, within a few minutes most of them found the stillness so uncomfortable that they chose the electric shocks instead. Participants discovered that sitting alone in stillness for even just a few minutes was agonizing, and even electric shocks were less excruciating than solitude. While solitude may at first seem like an expendable part of our lives, our ability to self-reflect and be comfortable with ourselves is crucial to having fulfilling relationships with others.

Why is solitude such a crucial foundation in our relationships? Sherry Turkle (2015) in her book *Reclaiming Conversation* says that solitude provides a space for self-reflection in order to explore who we are, and that directly affects how we engage with others. This is a foundational principle in many teachings about how to improve our relationships with others. Many great leaders describe our perception of the world not in terms of our external circumstances, but in regards to our internal mind. The key to understanding how we relate to other people in our lives is to first look at ourselves.

Ford (1998) says that “when we judge ourselves we automatically judge others. When we can accept ourselves, and forgive ourselves, we automatically accept and forgive others” (p. 6). She calls this projection, where we transfer our own subconscious behavior onto other people. When we attribute the qualities we do not like in ourselves onto other people, we are using a defense mechanism so that we can judge them instead of judging ourselves. She says that we work hard to hide our imperfections, so we have no patience for people who expose their own flaws.

For instance, when we call someone else a name, we must stop and consider whether we would call ourselves that name as well. If so, there is more healing we must do within ourselves before we can fully love and accept the other person. If we get offended by narcissism in others, it is probably because we are judging the narcissism we have within ourselves. This is different from simply noticing narcissistic tendencies, because we experience an emotional reaction during projection. If we were not judging our own narcissism, we would simply notice the trait without a strong reaction. Every trait exists because it has a gift, and we must recognize that gift in order to accept it without getting angry at others (Ford, 1998). Once we are able to embrace all aspects of ourselves, we can embrace those around us. The only way to accept our flaws and insecurities is through self-reflection, however, and we avoid that through technology.

We avoid self-reflection because we do not want to examine the negative aspects of ourselves. Ford (1998) says that “when we come face-to-face with our dark side our first instinct is to turn away, and our second instinct is to bargain with it to leave us alone” (p. 11). Leo Babauta, a Zen Buddhism teacher, says that we “tend to get sucked into distraction simply because we want to avoid the discomfort of whatever we don’t

want to work on” (Ohanks, 2013). We dodge solitude because we do not want the discomfort of being exposed to our flaws, such as the embarrassment of finding out that we are narcissistic. Confronting our flaws can cause shame or self-torment, and using our phones provides an easily available escape mechanism. As long as we have something to distract us, we do not have to closely examine the parts of ourselves that cause us pain. However, without self-growth, our relationships are stunted. If we cannot notice our flaws and work to improve them, we will experience the same issues and problems in our relationships and be unable to fix them. We must be willing to work through our issues in order to improve the way we interact with others.

Another form of projection that we engage in centers around our expectations. Babauta says that, “We often create expectations in the mind about... how others should act, and are often unaware that we’ve created these entirely made-up ideals. They’re not real. And of course reality never matches up to these ideals, so we become frustrated, angry, anxious” (Ohanks, 2013). Hassler (2014) calls this an expectation hangover, when we feel let down because someone else did not meet our expectations of them. Expectation hangovers may be caused by miscommunication, or they may be because of the unrealistic ideals that we projected onto someone else. Without the time to self-reflect in solitude, we just expect everyone else to behave exactly the way we want. We are not paying close attention to our own thoughts and asking ourselves whether we have communicated effectively or whether our expectations are realistic.

For example, we may expect someone to prioritize us highest in their lives without actually realizing it, so every time they do not text back fast enough we feel disappointed and let down. This is an unconscious expectation, so we may have never

told them that their texting response time made us feel as if they did not care about us. However, it is impossible for others to live up to our expectations unless we clearly discuss it and explain why it is important. In order to have this clear and effective communication, we must first take the time to self-reflect and understand what our expectations are and why we have them. Without understanding our own mind, we will not be able to properly communicate our thoughts to others and our relationships will suffer.

When projecting expectations onto other people, we also tend to avoid contemplating whether we are expecting them to provide something that we should be providing for ourselves. If we are feeling lonely, we may be afraid to take the time to sit quietly and ponder how we can be happy and fulfilled within our own company. Instead, we tend to take the easier route and text a friend or go online to get a temporary feeling of connection. We unconsciously use other people to fulfill our needs, which can create a cycle of dependency.

Turkle (2015) says that “the capacity for solitude makes relationships with others more authentic. Because you know who you are, you can see others for who they are, not for who you need them to be” (p. 46). This means that when we take the time to understand and accept ourselves fully, we can have a healthy relationship between two independent people. As each person takes the time to be alone and love themselves in their own company, they no longer need validation or acceptance from someone else. Without a strong sense of self gained from solitude, a relationship can disintegrate into an insecure attachment style. Instead of appreciating each other’s strengths and weaknesses, we rely on their strengths to hold us up and feel let down when they show weakness.

When this happens, we stop loving someone for who they are and instead become addicted to the comfort and validation that they provide. This trend towards codependency can be observed in studies from the past two decades. The percentage of American college students with secure attachment styles has decreased, and the percentage with insecure attachment styles has increased (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011). Not only is this relationship style unhealthy, but ultimately it will never be fulfilling. We cannot rely on someone else to meet all our needs and keep us feeling happy. It is a suffocating amount of pressure on the other person, and we must learn to be happy alone before we can be happy with someone else.

Solitude gives us time to think about ourselves and those around us, and it is necessary to maintaining fulfilling relationships. Even though it can be boring or painful to sit alone with our thoughts, increasing our capacity to experience this discomfort can create healthier relationships and higher self-awareness.

### **Changing Conversations**

Our intolerance to boredom is caused not only by the sheer volume of media that we consume, but also the way in which we receive the onslaught of digital information. We never have to be bored online because there is always more information to take in. While we wait for one web page to load, we can be browsing another site. As soon as we get bored of an app, we switch to a new app. We do not even need to wait patiently for someone to respond to a message, because we can be doing something else in the meantime.

Unfortunately, real life is not so fast-paced. Our intolerance to boredom online extends to our real-life conversations and we begin to get distracted as soon as there is a lull or a pause. These lulls are especially frequent in what Turkle (2015) calls “creative conversations,” where we explore each other’s thoughts and ideas rather than just passing information back and forth. Because of the spontaneous nature of curiosity and discovery, there are more pauses to process our thoughts and generate new ideas. Creating space to think deeply in the moment leads to further insight and intimacy, but when we perceive these lulls as boring, we immediately disengage. She says that this is especially detrimental because “it is often when we hesitate, or stutter, or fall silent, that we reveal ourselves most to each other. And to ourselves” (p. 23). When we allow for more space and patience in conversations, we are able to go deeper with one another. We can discover new things about the people we are close to, and we have the space to discuss new topics without fear of being perceived as uninteresting. With technology, however, we have become so accustomed to avoiding a slow pace that instead of pausing and waiting to see what new thoughts and ideas will emerge in a conversation, we often just want to find a new source of entertainment.

Turkle (2015) says that instead of tolerating an uninteresting subject, we simply tune out or check our phones for a minute. While we may not perceive these momentary breaks as a problem, studies have shown that returning to full focus after a temporary distraction actually takes longer than we think. After being interrupted, the time it took for computer programmers to return to their original task was five minutes or longer for half the sessions. Only one in six times they were able to return in under a minute (Parnin and Rugaber, 2009). If we turn our attentions to our phones for just a moment, we may

not be fully focused on what the other person is saying for an entire five minutes after returning to the conversation. Imagine how much important information or opportunities for intimacy we could miss if we are not completely focused on the other person during that period.

The more accustomed we get to online life, the more distractible we become. We have evolved a rapid pace style of skimming and switching mediums to consume all the media available online, and we have grown accustomed to receiving input in a very fragmented way. Instead of long, in-depth articles that require focus and concentration, the online world is saturated with short text boxes, quick scrolling, and mini previews of content. We no longer have to focus on anything too deeply, and it damages our ability to pay attention.

Nicolas Carr (2010) dives further into this phenomenon in his book *The Shallows*, where he discusses the increasing distractibility of the mind. Instead of making a conscious effort to focus our attention, our “linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts” (p. 10). He argues that our minds are no longer able to narrow in on one subject, and they are instead starting to work like a social media feed where they bounce between topics and thoughts without much concentration. Our increasing distractibility has been confirmed in a study by Levine et al. (2007), who showed that students who spent more time instant messaging one another scored lower on a focused attention scale (as cited in Rosen, 2012).

Carr believes this is causing us to become more prone to shallow thinking, because we get comfortable with skimming along the surface of topics rather than fully

engaging and exploring them at depth. This can, in turn, lead to shallow relationships because we are not diving deeply enough into conversations in order to achieve the level of vulnerability that creates intimacy. Focusing on a topic and slowing getting deeper with one another takes a lot of effort, and we no longer have the patience to make that effort.

Turkle (2015) says that “we struggle to pay attention to ourselves... And what suffers is our ability to pay attention to each other” (p. 10). If we cannot sustain solitude long enough to hear our own thoughts, we will not have the focus to actively listen to someone else. This creates barriers to intimacy because once distraction and boredom begin seeping into conversations, we are less capable of getting to know each other by focusing on a topic and exploring it at length. Before we can make the effort to slowly reveal deeper aspects of ourselves, our focus grabs onto something else and we switch topics. In doing so, we lose opportunities to be vulnerable and intimate with one another.

According to a study done over the past two decades, we are now having less conversations in which we share personal information. People now report having one-third fewer confidants than they had 20 years ago, which means that we have one-third fewer people that we can talk to about important or personal matters. The number of people with absolutely no one to talk to about personal matters has doubled (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). Derlega et al. (1993) says that self-disclosure is strongly tied to the development of close relationships (as cited in Ruppel, 2015), so our lack of intimate conversations is inhibiting our ability to create close bonds with others. The issue of not engaging in intimate conversations becomes even more prominent when we factor in the mediums through which we communicate, because Ruppel (2015)

showed that when conversations are transferred to texting or calling, the depth and breadth of self-disclosure is greatly reduced.

However, some studies have claimed that people are actually more willing to share personal information online than they are face-to-face (Joinson, 2001), and Rosen (2012) says that practicing communication online helps people have better conversations in person. However, Orr et al. (2009) showed that although shy students spent more time on Facebook, they had fewer friends than their peers. Face-to-face, “young adults learn the subtle nuances of communication, such as taking turns when you talk, pacing normal conversations, and even making small talk with people” (Rosen, 2012, Chapter 7, Section 3). However, “those who have social phobia or social anxiety often do not tend to internalize those strategies” (Ibid). As we communicate more often online, we do not develop the same skills required for face-to-face communication.

As our medium of communication changes, so does our manner of speaking. On social media, we simply post something interesting and then sit back to wait for a response. Students have reported trying to do the same thing in person, impeding a natural back-and-forth rhythm and endangering the kind of conversation “in which you listen intently to another person...where a discussion can go off on a tangent and circle back; where something unexpected can be discovered about a person or an idea” (Turkle, 2015, p. 22). Instead, “you would try to say something brilliant . . . something prepared in advance . . . and then you’d sit back and wait for your responses. You didn’t have to really engage. The idea of saying something as it occurred to you and getting a conversation going, that was gone” (Turkle, 2015, p. 138). Although communicating online can build confidence to talk in person, the strategies and conversational format that

we learn through texting and instant messaging do not transfer well to the real world. We lose our ability to be spontaneous and engaged in the moment, and our lack of engagement prevents us from actively listening, asking questions, and diving deep enough into a topic to really understand the other person. Without fully participating in a conversation and putting in the effort to open our minds and be curious, we impede our ability to get to know one another at a more intimate level face-to-face.

Mark Goulston (2010), author of *Just Listen: Discover the secret to getting through to absolutely anyone* says that “these days we’re experts at ‘syncing’ – getting different pieces of technology to talk to each other. Few of us, however, are experts when it comes to syncing with other people” (p. 25). According to him, one of the ways to resolve this disconnection from others is through empathy.

### **Decline of Empathy**

Empathy is one of the most important tools for establishing genuine relationships, and yet studies show that we are less empathetic than we were before the Internet existed. Since the Internet became widely available 20 years ago, there has been a 40% decline in markers of empathy among college students and a sharp decrease in the ability to take other perspectives (Konrath et al., 2011). This dramatic decline was correlated with technology usage in a study showing that more highly connected young women were less empathetic, less capable of self-reflection, and received less pleasure from social interactions (Pea et al., 2012). These traits were emphasized as the women reported a diminished capacity to identify both their own feelings and the feelings of others.

A similar study by Uhls et al. (2014) was conducted at a device-free summer camp, where children were asked to identify others' feelings based on pictures and videos of faces. After only five days at the camp without technology, their ability to identify these feelings – a measure of empathy – significantly increased (as cited in Turkle, 2015, p. 11). This study, like the other, indicates a strong link between increased technology use and decreased empathy. However, it also shows that we can reverse the process and improve our empathetic skills by simply putting down our phones for a while.

How exactly has technology usage contributed to the decline of empathy? Rosen (2012) described empathy as “a cognitive mechanism that allows people to imagine the internal mental state of another person” (Chapter 7, Section 2). Essentially, we are able to understand another person's feelings and emotions. A lack of empathy can be potentially tied back to our inability to experience solitude, because it is only through self-reflection that we learn to identify our own feelings. Without the ability to recognize and perceive our own feelings, we cannot identify the feelings of those around us. Pema Chödrön (2001) says, “only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others” (p. 50). However, our human tendency is to avoid pain at all costs. When we feel an unpleasant emotion, we distract ourselves with our phones rather than paying attention to our feelings and understanding them at a deeper level. Without taking the time in solitude to understand our own pain, we are unable to grasp the pain that someone else is experiencing.

Another large factor that may be attributed to our diminished capacity for empathy is that we are having less frequent face-to-face conversations. Goleman (2006) has offered a scientific perspective for why this phenomenon has affected our empathy.

Neurological research shows that when we hear someone speaking in sad tones of voice, it activates our brain circuits that are wired for sadness. Thus, we hear sadness and can suddenly feel what the other person is feeling, generating empathy just through the sound of the words.

In addition, we experience physiological synchronization when two people are speaking face-to-face. In a study on married couples arguing, their bodies began to mimic each other and match the other's physical disturbances. Rosen (2012) says that empathy is when "someone can match the emotions of another person" (Chapter 7, Section 2). The married couple began to match up to create a similar physiological state, and Goleman says that, "the more similar the physiological state of two people at a given moment, the more easily they can sense each other's feelings" (p. 25). Because they are physically synching up, they are able to feel each other's feelings and understand each other more clearly.

When we communicate through text, we do not experience the physiological responses that occur face-to-face. We cannot see the other person's face, hear their tone of voice, or even interpret their body language. The lack of additional cues makes it difficult to sense their emotions and match them, so we tend to feel less empathy through technological mediums.

Empathy is a skill that we must learn and practice, and face-to-face conversations are our most valuable opportunities to do so. As we communicate less frequently in person, our empathetic skills can deteriorate or become underdeveloped. Kids who have grown up in technological environments are developing empathy at much slower rates because they are spending more time on the screen and less time with each other. In one

study, teachers discovered that their twelve-year-old students still had the empathetic capacity of eight-year-olds because they had not developed further (Turkle, 2015).

Since empathy is stronger in face-to-face conversations, we have begun having uncomfortable conversations over text in order to avoid feeling pain for the person we are talking to. Turkle (2015) says that “when people say they’re ‘addicted’ to their phones, they are not only saying that they want what their phones provide. They are also saying that they don’t want what their phones allow them to avoid” (p. 37). In the same way that we escape our own pain through the distraction of phones, we can escape the pain of others as well. We have begun to create a “friction-free” life where we no longer need to experience as much discomfort or remorse when we have an argument with someone because we do not have to communicate with them face-to-face. Using cell phones, we can break up with a lover, apologize for a mistake, or bring bad news without having to see or experience the other person’s reaction. This denies us the opportunity for heartfelt self-reflection and increased understanding of those we are close to. Turkle (2015) says that apologizing in-person gives us the chance to develop empathy, whereas an apology over text allows us to “export the feeling rather than allowing a moment of insight... [and] displace the inner conflict without processing it” (p. 32). Arguing through technology is certainly easier, but Turkle says that as we become more comfortable in the digital world, eventually we may be unable to engage in difficult conversations without the emotional distance that online life provides. Without the digital buffer, there is far more risk for emotional vulnerability and we may start feeling exposed or uncomfortable speaking face-to-face.

Using technology to avoid feeling negative emotions is not a life hack, because Wright (2014) says that eluding negativity does not create more positivity and joy. Instead, we start to feel all emotions less intensely and our emotional capacity shrinks in all directions. We become accustomed to numbing ourselves, and “by numbing our feelings, we’re not being genuine. By avoiding fear, we become less than we could be” (p. 45). Ford (1998) agrees, because “by facing these aspects of ourselves, we become free to experience our glorious totality: the good and the bad, the dark and the light” (p. 2). By cutting ourselves off from our negative emotions, we begin living a detached and subdued life. We no longer feel fulfilled and connected, because our emotions are muted and we start to feel dull. Wright (2004) says that eventually “we glimpse how out of touch we are and ask, ‘is this all there is?’” (p. 22).

In order to return to a fulfilled, emotionally engaged life, we must open ourselves back up to feeling empathy even if the emotions are painful and uncomfortable. One of the ways we can increase our capacity for empathy is simply through listening. By hearing another’s perspective and letting ourselves tune into to their feelings and emotions, we can develop our ability to understand one another.

### **Listening to Others**

One cannot discuss the decline of empathy without mentioning the rise of narcissism. Narcissism is specifically characterized by a grandiose sense of self-importance, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy (Rosen, 2012). In a study of 16,000 college students between 1979 and 2006, post-millennial students were found to score substantially higher on the narcissistic personality inventory than the earlier group.

A staggering two-thirds of recent college students scored higher than average, compared to only half in the 70's and 80's (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Normal narcissism is a trait we all have to a greater or lesser extent, but our use of technology provides a larger outlet for it and seems to exacerbate the problem.

When we use social media, we can focus completely on ourselves. We do not even need to pay attention to what others have posted; instead, we can simply show off our lives and receive instant likes, comments, and further validation. Within this world, the ultimate goal is to be as impressive as possible. When we translate this into real life, however, constantly focusing on impressing others is perceived as arrogant. This is especially true in regards to conversation styles. Rather than telling everyone about ourselves, a face-to-face conversation should be more focused on learning about the other person.

Goulston (2010) says “the way to truly win friends... is to be more interested in listening to them than you are in impressing them... The more you try to convince people that you're brilliant or charming or talented, the more they're likely to consider you boring or self-centered. That's especially true if you step on their stories in a rush to work in your own” (p. 57). The key is not to see a conversation as a competition for who is the most intelligent, entertaining, or humorous. Instead, we want to enter into a conversation knowing that there is something interesting and valuable about the other person, and then become determined to discover it.

One of the skills that we do not get to practice through online communication is active listening. Active listening is “demonstrated through signals like reformulations, questions, intonations, facial expressions, imitations of word endings, or acts or gestures

that suggest the listener perceives unmentioned facts and feelings” (Fischer-Lokou, 2016, p. 996). Without face-to-face communication, we cannot practice imitating gestures or appropriate facial expressions. We cannot show them that we are seeing and understanding the feelings underlying their words, because we only have their words to pay attention to. We certainly cannot practice focused listening without thinking about other topics, because we are free to let our minds wander while the other person is typing out their thoughts. We tune in and out of an online exchange, send emojis to show our feelings, and type messages without much thought or engagement.

When we actively listen, we are engaging in the other person’s dialogue and providing them with cues to demonstrate that we are not only hearing what they say, but we are understanding it as well. Goulston (2010) says that there is a biological urge for the other person to respond by listening and understanding us in return. Almost every conversation we have provides a chance to practice and hone our listening skills, yet many people do not even realize that they appear disengaged. Think about a conversation you have had recently. While the other person was speaking, were you thinking about what you were going to say next, or were you paying complete attention until it was your turn to speak? Often we get so focused on saying the “right” thing (sensitive enough, funny enough, smart enough) that we are not fully focused on listening to the other person. If we get bored, we may even just tune out to follow a different train of thought. We stop listening even if the subject is important or interesting to the other person (Turkle, 2012), because we are accustomed to only giving half of our attention online. We are not accustomed to providing full focus for long periods of time.

When we consider the increasing rates of visits to counseling centers in recent years, it is interesting to think about what counselors provide that we may not be receiving by other people in our lives – listening. Most therapists are trained to utilize active listening with their clients, and it is possible that some people attend counseling simply because they do not feel like other people in their lives are genuinely listening to them. When we want to feel deeply heard and understood, we seek a professional. Their title gives us permission to explore our feelings without fear of judgement, and their training teaches them how to show empathy and genuine interest in our feelings.

As we practice more active listening in face-to-face conversations, gradually we will find that it becomes more natural and comfortable. People will feel more eager to share personal information with us, and they will want to actively listen when there is something we need to share as well. We will also be able to have more uncomfortable conversations face-to-face with one another, because we will know how to listen rather than defend ourselves. This is crucial to developing and maintaining intimacy, because our tendency to have difficult conversations online without listening or expressing empathy leads to more misunderstandings and conflict.

### **Misunderstanding Messages**

Harris (2014) has said that with the increasing use of visual communication forms, we now “privilege the information we take in through our eyes while reading and pay less heed to information that arrives via our other senses,” (p. 34). Instead of paying attention to vocal tones, body language, or our intuitive senses, we simply read the words on the screen. This means that our words gain more emphasis than they should, and

misinterpretations of messages become far more common. Instead of understanding one another, we argue over missed meanings and get into further conflict. Face-to-face conversations provide multiple physical cues for understanding, and they also create physical synchronization. Physical synchronization takes the pressure off of saying the exact right words because people begin to unconsciously match up their movements and mannerisms. Per Goleman (2006), this synchronization can smooth out awkward conversations by keeping people feeling connected to one another even during the pauses, therefore helping people feel more positive about the encounter and each other. Without this, the verbal coordination over technology must be near perfect to avoid miscommunication or feelings of misunderstanding.

The importance of physical cues was shown by Coyne et al. (2011), who found that people who used technology to confront issues during an argument were found to be less satisfied. Additionally, Henline & Harris (2006) found that misinterpretations through text messages created issues with developing intimacy and problem solving (as cited in Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). Resolving issues in a relationship is a crucial step towards understanding one another, yet technology seems to create a barrier to fully hearing each other and working through problems in a constructive way. The less we are able to understand one another and solve problems together, the more shallow and less intimate our relationships become.

### **Surface-level Relationships**

Turkle (2015) describes human relationships as “rich, messy, and demanding. When we clean them up with technology, we move from conversation to the efficiencies

of mere connection” (p. 21). She believes that our emotional distancing through technology has made our relationships shallower and less fulfilling. Yang (2014) proved this disengagement by finding that young adults “employed connectivity technology to control the extent to which they invested financial, time-based, and emotional costs in friendships. They maintained a ‘thin and simple’ emotional connection... with most of their friends” (p. 93). As we use technology to connect more and engage less, Turkle (2011) warns that “there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed—and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing” (as cited in Gardner & Davis, 2013, p. 104).

This returns to the rise of narcissism among young adults, because one of the characteristics of narcissism is forming relationships that will make them look better, and then ending them once they have fulfilled their use. Rosen (2012) says that “they are not interested in forming deep, long-lasting relationships, but rather seek any relationship that may serve to enhance their status and how others see them” (Chapter 2, Section 2). We often have many superficial relationships, which is promoted and encouraged through social media. Having more followers is not seen as narcissism; instead, society hails it as the ultimate symbol of being widely loved.

Are these relationships that we form on social media actually genuine? Turkle (2015) calls it “the illusion of friendship without the demands of intimacy” (p. 7). While we can stay constantly connected to one another, we no longer need to show up with the same emotional engagement. When a friend gets hurt or we have an argument, we can use texting to show up from a safer distance. Instead of actually feeling empathy and expressing it, we only need to type a few consoling words and then go back to our lives.

Young adults admit that in a crisis, they would prefer if their friends gave them a phone call or a face-to-face meeting. This is likely because we feel more empathy and feelings of support in person rather than virtually (Rosen, 2012). And yet, when the situation was reversed and their friends were in a crisis, students admitted that they rarely felt comfortable sending more than just a text (Standlee, 2016).

While it may seem easier to transfer these conversations to text messages, studies show that frequent texters are more likely to be lonely and socially anxious than those who prefer face-to-face conversations (Reid & Reid, 2004). One study used affiliation cues and self-reporting to prove that friends experienced the greatest levels of bonding with in-person communication and the lowest levels of bonding through instant messaging, even while using emoticons and other texting cues (Sherman, Michikyan, & Greenfield, 2013). These studies show that we feel more disconnected when we communicate through technology, and part of this may be due to the fact that we are less emotionally engaged with online relationships. When we use technology to stay emotionally distant, our relationships are less intimate and we become less vulnerable.

### **Vulnerability**

Gardner and Davis (2013) say, “communicating through a screen instead of face to face removes the need to take emotional risks in our relationships... we don’t have to experience the discomfort of facing another person’s unfiltered and often unexpected reaction” (p. 104). As we grow more comfortable with carefully crafting every message, re-reading it, and editing before we send it, our anxiety about spontaneous conversation increases. We use technology to gain the kind of perfection that we cannot achieve

through spontaneous speaking, and the more we get used to texting, the less comfortable we feel having conversations where we cannot edit our responses. Turkle (2015) describes this as needing to get it “right,” or a fear of saying the wrong thing in the heat of the moment. We avoid spontaneous speaking because we fear vulnerability, but Brown (2012) says, “honest engagement... is always fraught with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure for everyone involved” (p. 201). This honest and vulnerable engagement, no matter how much it scares us, is crucial for creating genuine and fulfilling relationships.

Although we try to use technology to avoid emotional exposure, Brown (2012) says that “regardless of our willingness to do vulnerability, it does us” (p. 45). Turkle (2015) agrees, arguing that no matter how hard we try to maintain distance, feelings of control rarely signify actual control. She calls it the Goldilocks fallacy, because our attempts to share just the right amount and stay at just the right distance are futile. Whenever people are “continually connected, it is impossible to maintain any ‘just right’ distance” (p. 202). Although we try to avoid the emotional risks of being too close to one another and exposing our authentic selves, the pressure to constantly communicate through technology eventually forces us to remove our masks. We cannot communicate through multiple mediums multiple times a day and stay at a comfortable emotional distance – we will indubitably end up too close or too far away from each other. In order to avoid drifting too far apart in our relationships, we must be willing to take emotional risks and be vulnerable with one another. This may include moving an uncomfortable conversation from online to in person, letting go of our need to make it perfect in order to avoid emotional disconnection from one another.

Rosen (2012) regards the fear of emotional exposure as another disorder relating to social phobia. He defines social phobes as “those people who are constantly on guard; they fear being judged by others and worry about being embarrassed or even humiliated by their own actions” (Chapter 7, Section 1). Relinquishing our digital filter may inevitably create more vulnerability, but Brown (2012) says, “to foreclose on our emotional life out of a fear that the costs will be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living” (p. 33). She believes that vulnerability is crucial to intimate relationships, and we must enter personal, painful, or revealing conversations with a willingness to engage instead of shutting down or disconnecting. Having these kinds of vulnerable conversations face-to-face may seem uncomfortable or scary, but the emotional risk can provide a deeper level of emotional connection with the other person. While this vulnerability is easy to avoid as we spend more time in the online world, evading it creates emotional distance that can prohibit genuine intimacy in relationships.

In an authentic relationship, we no longer fear our emotions. Instead of fearing rejection, we trust that the other person will not abandon us for expressing our feelings or making a mistake. Unfortunately, there are decreasing levels of trust among young adults. Only nineteen percent of millennials agree that most people can be trusted, which is fewer than any other age group (“Millennials in Adulthood,” 2014). Trust has been strongly tied to self-rated health and happiness (Carl & Billari, 2014), and researcher Robert Putnam has attributed the decline in trust to the internet’s social isolating capabilities (Morgan, 2014). How does the internet isolate us socially, even though it appears to make us more connected? Isolation is not a measure of the number of friends

we have or the amount of people we talk to; it is a measure of whether or not we feel deeply seen, heard and understood. While part of our feelings of isolation can be attributed to our fear of vulnerability, another factor is our growing fear of authenticity.

### **Authenticity**

Through social media and our perfectly crafted text messages, we are able to present a more ideal version of ourselves to the world. However, the more we show up as our ideal selves, the less seen we feel. Our friends and lovers are not seeing our true selves, but rather a much more carefully maintained version. In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brene Brown (2012) says, “true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world” (p. 145). Turkle (2015) talks about the idea of sending in our “representatives,” or rather the person we would like to be instead of the person we are. Face-to-face, this illusion is more difficult to keep up and our authentic self is more easily revealed. Over texting, however, we can carefully craft a message and get a friend’s input to say the exact right thing, effectively allowing us to present a false image over longer periods of time. As we use technology to maintain this pretense, we inhibit genuine closeness because we do not feel like the other person truly knows and understands us.

Social media usage is fraught with self-protection, because rather than letting the online world witness the vulnerable aspects of our lives, we showcase the best versions of ourselves and pretend that it represents our entire reality. This may be a reason that higher usage of social media leads to more depression and social anxiety (Becker, Alzahabi, & Hopwood, 2012), since “the level to which we protect ourselves from being

vulnerable is a measure of our... disconnection” (Brown, 2012, p. 2). We feel more comfortable hiding our authentic selves, but this causes us to be pushed further into emotional isolation as we become more disconnected from one another. Brown (2012) says that “in order to deal with shame, some of us move away by withdrawing, hiding, silencing ourselves, and keeping secrets” (p. 77). She posits that shame thrives in secrecy, and the more we deny it, the more control it has over our lives. We are afraid to admit that we need emotional support because we fear judgment or unworthiness, but our fear of other’s opinions just makes us more alone. Technology provides an easy and comfortable way to hide from the gaze of others, leading to more disconnection from the emotional support and deep understanding that we crave. We must be continuously aware of whether we are revealing our true selves to the people around us in order to maintain fulfilling relationships, even if this means that we feel uncomfortable or vulnerable.

We protect ourselves further by using social media to as a way to express ourselves through external sources such as memes or popular articles. We borrow other people’s ideas for our posts so that we can participate from a distance without revealing anything too personal. Gardner and Davis (2013) say that what we post online “may have little connection to the... internal sense of self, with its associated values, beliefs, feelings, and aspirations” (p. 5). Expressing ourselves based on internal sources such as our own experience or ideas has a much higher risk factor because there is more vulnerability involved. (Turkle, 2015). Gardner & Davis (2013) posit that “by turning everything into a joke, youth risk nothing because they make nothing of themselves vulnerable. Yet vulnerability is precisely what’s needed to connect with other people in an honest and meaningful way” (p. 106). Vulnerable social media posts are far less

common, yet they provide more opportunity for connection with others because we are allowing ourselves to be seen. We use technology to hide our flaws, but being seen in our totality is crucial to maintaining fulfilling relationships. If we simply relate to one another through a mask instead of showing up authentically, we may feel more isolated and disconnected from the people around us.

### **Tying It All Together**

One can clearly see the impact that technology has had within various aspects of our lives, but how do all these small effects work together to create the bigger issues within our relationships? As we begin to communicate more with technology, we enter into a cycle where the other people in our lives expect us to be constantly available. And as others begin communicating more with technology, we fear that we may miss out on something if we disengage even temporarily. This leads to more technology use, which snowballs into the bigger problems.

More technology means less solitude, because we have less time and we begin to crave the constant stimulation. Without solitude, we cannot process our feelings and reflect on how we can grow both individually and as friends or partners. Therefore, we miss opportunities for empathy, remain stuck in our negative habits, and cannot work to improve ourselves and our relationships.

As we neglect to take the time to confront and understand ourselves, we become used to avoiding emotional engagement. Technology provides a digital filter through which to connect with one another, so we begin to feel uncomfortable dealing with the reality of difficult emotions when we can just send a quick text and move on. As we have

more emotional conversations through technology instead of face-to-face, our empathy levels decline or become underdeveloped and our relationships become shallower and more disconnected.

As we emotionally disengage from one another, we begin to feel anxious living life without a filter. We are so comfortable with controlling how everyone perceives us that we feel anxious letting ourselves be messy and imperfect in the real world. We begin to fear living authentically and vulnerably because we cannot control whether or not others will judge us, so we hide our flaws. As we stop allowing ourselves to be seen in our totality, we begin to feel misunderstood and isolated instead of accepted for who we are. We use technological communication to avoid the full spectrum of emotional engagement, including making mistakes, being accepted for our imperfect selves, and having difficult conversations to connect with one another on a deeper level, and as a result our relationships become less intimate and less fulfilling.

Although technology's effects may seem overwhelming, there are many steps we can take in order to continue using our phones and social media while simultaneously maintaining satisfying and valuable connections with the people around us. After reviewing the research and taking time to reflect on my own, I have compiled a series of suggestions that people can implement into their lives. The goal of this thesis is not to make the reader feel hopeless, but rather to provide perspective and tips that can help us move our relationships forward in positive ways.

### **III. MOVING FORWARD**

The previous section detailed all the research regarding the decline of our relationships, so the next step is understanding how we can use that information. In this chapter I will provide practical, concrete steps and daily tips that we can use to make forward progress in maintaining fulfilling relationships instead of getting caught in a downward spiral of disconnection. We can apply our understanding of technology's effects to become more conscious of our unfavorable tendencies, allowing us to continually work to improve ourselves and the way we relate to one another.

How do we become more aware of our thoughts and actions to maintain fulfilling relationships as we navigate the world of technological communication? The solution is not to rid ourselves of technology or to stop using it completely. Rather, the goal is to become more present so that we are not operating from our subconscious patterns.

#### **Choosing a Medium**

The first step to improving our relationships is becoming aware of our communication habits, because communication is often considered one of the most important aspects of a healthy relationship. Although we frequently use technology to talk with one another, our first thought before engaging in a conversation online should be whether or not technology is the right medium to use.

Before sending a message, ask yourself if the conversation is emotionally charged. If you are deciding on a time or place to meet, giving small updates about your day, or providing neutral information, then you can easily communicate these topics through text. However, more intense conversations should be handled face-to-face. If you

are breaking up with a significant other, expressing negatively charged emotions such as anger or sadness, or sharing extremely good or bad news, talking face-to-face is a better choice. Avoiding strong emotions over text message reduces the risk of misinterpreting someone's messages, which can lead to further conflict and disconnection. You cannot fully understand someone's emotional state and intentions through text message, so you may find it difficult to appropriately respond.

In addition, having emotional conversations in person can increase feelings of closeness and intimacy. When you argue face-to-face and can see the other person's feelings of guilt, hurt, shame, or sadness, you can feel empathy for them and start to see the situation from their perspective. This is the same for talking about particularly upsetting or joyful topics, because understanding the other person's emotions will help you experience each other in deeper ways.

### **Having Difficult Conversations**

Having emotionally charged conversations face-to-face can be extremely difficult. You may experience a fear of saying the wrong thing in the heat of the moment, fear of showing emotional vulnerability, or even just discomfort at feeling and seeing negative emotions. Part of the unease can be alleviated through practice, because you will be able to build up your tolerance for emotional situations. An even stronger factor in improving this skill set, however, is spending more time in solitude.

Solitude can be found through meditation, walks in nature, yoga practice, or any other activity that allows you to disconnect from the world and tune into your own mind. It can even be found in the heat of an argument, if you take time to sit and breathe by

yourself. Taking the time to process your thoughts and feel your feelings is crucial. We are often tempted to turn to our phones whenever a negative thought or feeling arises, but when we turn to ourselves instead we have the opportunity to work through it and understand it. If you feel a negative emotion, let it move through your body without distracting yourself or trying to numb it. Pay attention to the feeling and try to understand what it means for you. If it started as anger, perhaps you will notice it turning into shame or hurt. Through this practice, we can learn to sit with negative feelings instead of running away, and we will get better at identifying our emotions and knowing how to express them. We will no longer fear emotional conversations in person, because we will have the ability to handle the discomfort and express our feelings in a constructive, effective way.

Time in solitude is also important to gain more control over our minds and emotions. Taking time to listen to our thoughts and feelings will help us understand ourselves deeper, and we will be able to respond better in our face-to-face conversations. When we text a difficult conversation, we have time to think about exactly what we want to say and to breathe in between messages. Many people prefer using this medium because they feel like they won't mess up. In person, however, we can learn the skills to be just as effective as we are through technology. In the middle of an emotional conversation face-to-face, you can still take a few minutes to step away, breathe, and gain more clarity so that you can respond effectively instead of just using a knee-jerk reaction. Practice taking the time to process your feelings in the heat of the moment rather than just saying the first thing that comes to your mind.

Processing these feelings in the middle of a conversation will also become easier as you spend more time in solitude. Solitude provides a space to pay attention to your emotions and understand your feelings clearer, allowing you to recognize and understand them in deeper ways. You may learn that although you seem to be feeling one emotion, there are actually deeper emotions occurring underneath. As we learn to recognize these underlying emotions, we will become better at communicating our true feelings and dealing with them in the moment.

### **Effective Face-to-Face Communication**

Turkle (2015) suggests that the number one fix for our relationships is to simply have more face-to-face conversations. While this is true, I also believe we need to look even deeper to see the type of face-to-face conversations that we are having. When we communicate in person, do we feel deeply nourished? Are we having high quality conversations that bring us closer together?

Our face-to-face conversations have changed as we have adapted to technology, and we have a harder time focusing and engaging. When we converse through text, we barely have to pay attention to the conversation at hand. We can send a message, and then let our thoughts wander as we browse through our phones until we need to text again. In person, however, we cannot just lend half of our attention to a conversation. We need to work on fully engaging by making eye contact, staying focused, and practicing active listening.

How can you use active listening to provide a space for others to feel like you are fully engaging with them? The State Department (2003), head of effective diplomacy,

define the four rules for active listening as 1) Seek to understand before you seek to be understood, 2) Be non-judgmental, 3) Give your undivided attention to the speaker, and 4) Use silence effectively (“Active Listening,” 2003). This essentially means that you focus on what they say without interrupting, becoming unfocused, or pushing your own agenda forward in the conversation. Instead of thinking about what you are going to say next, pay complete attention to what they are saying right now. The goal of a conversation is for you to show up with the intention of understanding what the other person is communicating, rather than trying to make your own thoughts heard at their expense.

Active listening can be even more effective at developing intimacy when you learn to ask relevant questions. Instead of just briefly listening to the other person speak before quickly switching the conversation back to yourself or another topic, you can dive further into the other person’s thoughts and ideas. You can ask clarifying questions, such as, “It sounds like you were really frustrated, right?” or questions to show that you are interested and want to hear more, such as, “And then what happened?” Using questions shows the other person that you are curious and genuinely want to hear what they have to say. Similarly, you can also paraphrase their words to show that you understood. If they told a long-winded story, you can answer by summarizing and rephrasing what they said. Once they feel that you have adequately processed everything they told you thus far, they will feel more comfortable continuing the conversation.

Having more face-to-face conversations is important to practice these skills, but you must also think about the mindset with which you approach conversations. As you become comfortable with the digital filter, it can be easy to fear the spontaneity and flaws

that come with face-to-face communication. You may fear judgement for saying the wrong thing or being too vulnerable, but that fear can be managed through more time in solitude. You can use the time with yourself to practice compassion for yourself and your human mistakes, and slowly you can learn to love your flaws and feel more confident expressing yourself around others.

There is a lot of practice involved with face-to-face conversations. We are not born knowing how to focus, how to listen, and how to handle difficult conversations. We learn gradually, as we confront our fears and make mistakes over and over again. Once we develop the skills involved in effective communication, we will feel closer to those around us and more capable of creating intimacy and depth in our relationships.

### **Effective Digital Communication**

Practicing conversations face-to-face is not enough, however. We will still continue to communicate with one another through technology, and we must learn to be more conscious about how we are perceived and how we may be misunderstanding others. One of the greatest and easiest tools to keep in mind is *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz (2003). Although his book was not intended specifically for technological communication, his four main points are all very relevant and can help alleviate some of the problems that we experience in the online world.

The first agreement is to be impeccable with your word. He emphasizes the power that the word has, and how easily people take the words that you say to heart. Words become especially powerful when they are immortalized through technology. There are no extra vocal or facial cues when you send a text message, so it can quickly be taken out

of context if you are feeling stressed in your world and it is perceived as angry from the receiver. Without an explanation, words can quickly be twisted and misunderstood.

Saying regretful words online is much easier because you tend to be more uninhibited when you are not face-to-face. Even if you know the person on the other end of the digital communication, there is still an illusion of safety and anonymity (Rosen, 2012). In addition, you are not interrupted by their cues of upset or anger while saying hurtful things, so there is nothing to stop you if you go too far. Unfortunately, once your words are online, there is a permanency to them that you do not experience in the real world. If you say hurtful words in the heat of an argument, the other person can screenshot the message, post it online, and send it to their friends. Before you can apologize, hundreds of people are already part of the conversation. Then, each of you can go back and re-read the messages over and over again, dwelling on the situation instead of moving forward. In a study by Davila et al. (2012), young people who fixated and talked to others about negative encounters online were more likely to stay depressed. In addition, Mathews and MacLeod (2005) found that people fixated more heavily on negative comments instead of positive comments, so there is a much higher chance that the other person is obsessing over the messages from the arguments instead of the sweet “good morning” texts (as cited in Rosen, 2012). You may think that saying hurtful words online is less painful, but the reality is that the words last longer and continue to impact the other person long after the end of the conversation.

In essence, the goal is to be very careful with the words you use online. If you are feeling strong emotions, pause before you send the message. Consider whether the message is something that you want to exist permanently, or something that may be

misinterpreted. If possible, wait until you see the person and can communicate face-to-face. If you lash out with a text in the heat of the moment, you are more likely to regret what you say. You must be careful about your emotional state when sending a message, and think twice about how the other person may receive it.

The second agreement is to not take anything personally. Every message that you send and receive is filtered through your own perception, and nobody else can understand exactly how you see the world. The way you perceive a message is probably completely different than the way someone else intended it, and vice-versa. Stone et al. (2010) suggests questioning your mindset when you read a message. “What you experience as an attack might in their mind be meant as a defense against your attack,” even if you don’t realize you attacked them (p. 275). We cannot understand exactly what triggers them, in the same way that they will not know what triggers us. We must be careful assuming their short answers, long reply times, or other indicators have anything to do with us or how they feel about us.

The third agreement is do not make assumptions. Ruiz (2003) says, “all the sadness and drama you have lived in your life was rooted in making assumptions and taking things personally” (p. 64). You assume that other people know exactly what you are thinking or intending to say, but they don’t. In the same way, you do not know what someone else is thinking either. He posits that you assume everyone sees life the way you do, and this is why you are afraid to be yourself. You fear that others will judge you the way you judge yourself, and so you reject them before they can reject you.

Imagine when someone does not respond to a text message. Automatically, you begin to assume that they are angry, they are going to break up with you, or that they are

being passive-aggressive and taking revenge. You assume these because you do not want to get caught off-guard. So, you become overly cautious and paranoid to try and stay one step ahead and figure out what they are thinking before they can blindside you.

Unfortunately, this only leads to suffering and anxiety because there is no way to know exactly what they feel or think. You may be assuming that they are trying to hurt you because of past experience or your own tendencies, but the truth of the situation is that there is no message from them on our phone, nothing more and nothing less. Creating stories and assumptions will only create misunderstanding and pain.

The fourth agreement is to always do your best. This is up to each one of us to define, but a large part of this work is doing our best even when it feels uncomfortable. Confronting someone with a difficult conversation, expressing our feelings, or being vulnerable can be scary and painful. However, the more we engage with life and others, the more connected we will feel. We must continue to practice conscious communication, paying attention to our inner thoughts and understanding both ourselves and others. Once we develop the skills to communicate effectively and create genuine intimacy, our relationships will become less disconnected and more fulfilling.

### **Baby Steps**

There are a lot of big life overhauls that one can make in order to create more fulfilling relationships, but what about the small, daily practices? By taking concrete steps each day we can work toward improving ourselves and the way we relate to each other. Below are some tips that we can implement into our daily lives.

- *Spend time in solitude.* Take time each day to put down the phone and pay attention to your own thoughts. You can draw, walk through nature, meditate, or try any other activity that provides time for self-reflection. Use this time to process your feelings and understand yourself in deeper ways.
- *Disconnect from electronic communication.* Throughout the day, see how long you can go without checking your phone. Try not to look at your phone more often than once an hour, and slowly increase the time as needed. If you get a text, try not to respond immediately unless it is an absolute emergency. You may need to talk to the people who frequently send you messages and let them know how they can support you in this. Perhaps you can even ask for their help in making your relationship with them less technology-oriented.
- *Stop arguing through text messages.* If you start having an argument over text or social media and you think it could escalate emotionally, tell the other person that you would like to wait until you see them and discuss the issue in person. If this is not possible, try to call them on the phone or talk face-to-face through Skype.
- *Pay attention to your feelings.* When you feel a strong emotion, whether it is because of something you read online or something that happened in person, take a moment to stop and think. Instead of reacting immediately, take deep breaths and pay attention to the sensations in your body. Feel your emotions moving

through you and try to understand what you are feeling. Wait until you feel calm and clear-headed before responding.

- *Do not make assumptions.* Next time you get annoyed over a text or lack thereof, think about the reality of the situation. Consider whether you may be making assumptions or misinterpreting the other person before you respond aggressively or build up a false story in your head. Instead, ask them directly what they are thinking or intending.
- *Live more authentically.* Instead of keeping your true self hidden, embrace your emotions and your vulnerability. Talk to others about your worries, your failures, your hopes, and your successes. Each time you notice yourself trying to look perfect, avoiding your feelings, or pretending to be someone that you're not, try to find a way to express your authentic, messy self.
- *Ask questions.* When you engage in a conversation with someone, ask questions. Use their responses to form your next question, and focus on them instead of yourself. Your primary goal should be to listen and learn from them.
- *Notice other people's emotions.* Pay attention to the people around you, and take note of nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and body language. If someone looks upset, ask if they need help. If they look happy, celebrate with them. Be aware of your surroundings and try to respond to other people's emotions.

- *Seek help.* If you feel like you have a real addiction to your phone, talk to a counselor. Remember that you are not the only one struggling, and there may be underlying issues that need to be addressed before you can make changes. Surround yourself with people that will support you and hold you accountable to breaking your habits.
- *Renew conversation.* Have more conversations face-to-face with both friends and strangers. Push your comfort zone by talking to people that are not like you, and learn more about our similarities and differences. Continuously seek out new ways to understand people and the world around you.

Technology is not going away. It will continue to grow and evolve, but it will likely become more prevalent in our lives rather than less. We can learn to use it effectively, but we must be willing to become more conscious about our usage. This thesis was meant to provide an examination of our relationships as they are affected by technology, especially concerning our conversations and emotional engagement. After understanding the research, we can implement the specific action steps that were suggested in order to counteract technology's isolating effects. By making small changes and continuing to reflect on how technology is changing both ourselves and our relationships, we will be able to maintain fulfilling lives and keep our relationships connected and engaged.

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