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Scrolling into Oblivion: How Technology is Wrecking Our Lives (But We Can't Stop)

From the moment we wake up to the second we fall asleep, we are consumed by technology. It shapes the way we think, interact, and even feel—but at what cost? Wake up. Realization is hitting. Do we really want screens to dictate our lives? At the least, being cognizant of this fact may save many from mindless dependency, diminished real-world connections, and the loss of empathic abilities. Immersing ourselves in the truth and the real impact of screens is illustrated perfectly by *The Empathy Diaries*, written by Sherry Turkle. It offers many points of view worth serious consideration. Turkle, a clinical psychologist and professor at MIT, is known for her research on the impact technology has on human relationships and psychology. She believes that awareness and conscious choices can help restore meaningful interactions. In her memoir, she reflects on the impact screens have on humans, especially younger generations, and their ability to empathize and engage with others. The memoir argues that excessive technology use takes away parts of ourselves that we take for granted; such as social skills and general awareness.

Turkle writes, “It all adds up to a flight from conversation - at least from conversation that is open-ended and spontaneous, conversation in which we play with ideas, in which we allow ourselves to be fully present and vulnerable. Yet these are the conversations in which the creative collaborations of education and business thrive.”(p. 344 pg. 5) To put it another way, she describes that the lack of open-ended and spontaneous conversations have a huge impact on

areas such as education and business, that depend on creativity and free flowing, unfiltered, and screen-free communication. These types of conversations encourage collaboration, allowing new ideas to emerge naturally. Through experience, the best collaboration happens through in-person interactions. When ideas bounce off of each other more organically, especially in real-time, I can easily see my team on the same page working in harmony. Ultimately, achieving our end goals together. Unfortunately, screen dependency has truly disrupted this idea of this “in-person harmony,” as Turkle describes a “flight from conversation.” We would much rather hide behind our screens in the comfort of only ourselves. Whether it's a fear to be judged or criticized, or pure laziness, fully present and vulnerable conversations are no one's priority anymore. During Covid, many became comfortable with work and school at home, due to the flexibility and convenience. This temporary change became the new normal for many people. When Covid ended and it was time to return to in-person activities, both children and adults seemed to have completely forgotten their social skills. Many chose to continue on working at home, now that in-person was deemed “optional.” Turkle’s emphasis on vulnerability and empathy really sticks with me. I absolutely agree with those who say these situations are hard and possibly straining, but that only builds our character and helps us grow into the people we are. In today's world, vulnerability is seen as a privilege to experience from others. I wonder if before screen popularity, this experience was more common.

As a student - I see this behavior in the classroom daily. At this point, I’m unfazed seeing students blatantly disrespect teachers or even each other. It’s becoming increasingly difficult to have face-to-face interactions in classrooms. Many students prefer to work alone, absorbed in their phones, rather than engage with other students. Turkle includes an important example that the dean at Holbrook School in Upstate New York shared with her. Keep in mind that this

interaction was in December 2013, at this point twelve years ago. A seventh-grader trying to exclude a classmate from a school social event was pulled into the dean's office, her response was disappointing to say the least.

*[The seventh-grader] was almost robotic in her response. She said, "I don't have feelings about this." She couldn't read the signals that the other student was hurt.*

*These kids aren't cruel. But they are not emotionally developed. Twelve-year-olds play on the playground like eight-year-olds. The way they exclude one another is the way eight-year-olds would play. They don't seem able to put themselves in the place of other children, They say to other students: "You can't play with us."*

*They are not developing that way of relating where they listen and learn how to look at each other and hear each other.*

At the same school, students are seen at the dining hall on their phones. When they do talk to each other, their conversations are usually about what's on their phones. Turkle poses a question: "Is this the new conversation?" (p. 345). She follows up with, "If so, it is not doing the work of the old conversation. As these teachers see it, the old conversation taught empathy. These students seem to understand each other less." (p. 345)

Hiding behind our phones has become a serious social barrier. We find ourselves turning to our phones for multiple reasons. We're plain bored, the situation is awkward, standing in line, or waiting for literally anything. Even walking past an intimidating group at school, I find myself or others pulling out their phones to keep their eyes down. It's become second nature, possibly due to our brain chemistry and how we react to screens. Turkle analyses just that, "...We often find ourselves bored because we have become accustomed to a constant feed of connection, information, and entertainment. We are forever elsewhere." (p. 344) In other words, our minds

can't stand minutes, even seconds without the convenient dopamine hits we receive from our phones. When Turkle says, "We are forever elsewhere," I resonate with that statement and completely agree. I feel that we're at the point of no return. It's possible to heal and overcome this fact, but technology has implanted itself deep into our neurochemical processes. It's normalized to crave "doom scrolling," and take time to "rot," after doing something subjectively difficult. For example, after a long day of classes and homework, my friends and I find that the best way to unwind is to glue our eyes to another screen and endlessly scroll. Wasting a massive amount of time doing so, we lack self care and help. Productivity can be hard after a long day, but I find myself feeling much more fulfilled if I spend my time wisely. Fresh air, exercise, chats with friends, good food, etc!