

Chapter Six

Being Alone Together

“Not that long ago, we were trying to figure out how we would keep our computers busy.... [Now] they keep us busy. It’s kind of as though we are their killer app.”

Sherry Turkle, psychologist and professor

Have you ever been physically separated from your phone and sensed that you just received a text message? You’re sitting in class while your phone is in your locker, and yet in some sort of strange violation of the space-time continuum, you know that you just received a text.

Most everybody has experienced “phantom ringing,” a mental false alarm of receiving a call or a text message, but this is different. This is like a technological mind-reading. It’s like your phone is somehow connected to your person.

Sherry Turkle is incredibly smart, a psychologist and professor of social studies and technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). For the last thirty years she has studied the impact of computer and online technology on people and their relationships. She used to think technology would revolutionize our lives for the good. But after years of study and observation, she changed her tune.

Turkle recently wrote a book titled *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Instead of being optimistic about online life, she expresses a deep concern about the state of human relationships. She argues that as our technology increases, so does our loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Rather than bringing us together, the internet is wrecking our relationships. “We’re designing technologies that will give us the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship.” ¹

How Our Technology Shapes Us

Historically, every new technology has naysayers who predict terrible things will happen to humanity if we don’t resist it. Most of the time, technofears are overblown. However, it is concerning how much of our lives are now online and how it’s affecting us.

If you’re like most students, you tend to dramatically underestimate how much time you spend with phones, tablets, televisions, or computer monitors. The average time students spend in front of glowing screens continues to skyrocket. CNN recently reported that Americans now spend ten hours a day with screens of some kind. ²

There is virtually no place in our lives where a screen isn’t front and center. When was the last time you were hanging out with friends and not a single person took out a smartphone? Yeah, never. It’s no exaggeration to say that relationships today are lived out more indirectly than directly. Today, our digital devices intrude on every experience, conversation, and relationship. And there are consequences when life is lived this way. ³ We’re risking losing touch on multiple levels.

First, we lose touch with our world. Especially through social media like Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram, we adopt an odd posture toward everyday life. Rather than enjoying the moment we’re in and making the most of an experience, we find ourselves thinking, *How many likes and shares will my picture of this get?*

Second, we lose touch with one another. Because so much communication doesn't happen face to face, we struggle with basic people skills, like making eye contact in conversation or understanding nonverbal cues.

Online life also challenges our willingness and ability to be honest and vulnerable with others. We carefully curate our social-media profiles, meticulously editing every picture and post for friends and family to scroll through (and perhaps to be jealous of!). We don't post our struggles or lonely moments online. We present ourselves in the best possible way. This is largely responsible for ushering in the "age of envy." As we browse the pages of Instagram celebrities (or even friends), their lives seem way more desirable than ours.

Social media also fosters a false sense of intimacy and connection with others. Today we can have thousands of "friends." But in reality we lack deep, meaningful relationships. Jimmy Kimmel, in his frequent late-night-television-show segment called "Mean Tweets," demonstrates how technology allows us to dismiss the humanity of others. Kimmel will have celebrities, athletes, and other public figures read out loud terrible things people have tweeted at them, like:

- You look like someone who just gave up.
- You're the worst thing to ever happen. Full stop. #UghBarf
- Trying to imagine what's worse, you or Hitler.
- Here's how you could help your fellow humans. Disappear forever.

Clearly, we're far more likely to say things online than we'd ever say to someone's face.

Third, we lose touch with ourselves. The tendency today is to become curators of our own online museums. When we carefully select and edit images to share with others, we can lose touch with the real us as we construct a false identity.

Additionally, online life gives the false impression that we can separate who we are into public and private realms. Particularly in the case of pornography addiction (which is a problem for boys *and* girls), we cultivate deadly sins online under different identities. But there is only one self—a God-created one.

Over time, the pressures of our online platforms can even cause us to abandon our deeply held convictions. If you express Christian views on controversial issues like homosexuality, same-sex marriage, or transgender identity, your social status will take a big hit. So we just stay silent or even start to change our beliefs. Plus, we often feel required to like the post of a friend or celebrity, even if he or she is boasting about a view or activity that violates God's standards.

The Lies Technology Teaches Us

Dr. Kathy Koch, a popular speaker and an expert in educational psychology and learning styles, describes the lies that are taught by our tech-shaped culture. ⁴ Consider whether you and your friends have bought into these lies:

Lie #1: I am the center of my own universe.

Technology allows you to live in an online world of your own making. You design the playlists and photo albums according to your online personality. Google even tracks your online behavior and delivers custom search results it thinks you desire. Technology promises to cater to your every need, without limitations. Everything is designed to revolve around *you*.

Of course, reality doesn't always bend to your wants or needs. If you believe you're the center of your own universe, you're in for a world of hurt and disappointment. Even worse, you'll fall for the very first lie: "You will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5).

Lie #2: I deserve to be happy all the time.

Today's technology promises immediate gratification. You can get what you want when you want it. It's an on-demand world: movies, music, sexual pleasure, adventure, violence, revenge, gadgets, games. If an app or game or platform doesn't satisfy, you simply move on to the next thing. It's ironic that with so many distractions and devices that so many students seem perpetually bored.

Scroll through Instagram. Pay close attention to your friends' Snapchat stories. What do you see? Smiling people going to cool places, eating great food, and having wonderful vacations. Technology teaches that the good life is one that's faster, easier, on your own terms, and full of pleasure. Online, everyone seems to be happy. And you deserve to be happy too.

However, real life includes lonely moments, hard work, dissatisfaction, struggle, and pain. But if everyone around you seems to be happy all the time and you're not, you'll be tempted to think there's something wrong with your life. No wonder anxiety and depression are on the rise in your generation. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide is the second leading cause of death for ten- to twenty-four-year-olds. ⁵

If you fall for this lie, you'll absorb the values of the culture—convenience, choice, and pleasure. But you'll miss developing essential character qualities that lead to true joy and contentment—patience, wisdom, and perseverance.

Lie #3: I must have choices.

Technology gives us the illusion that choices are required to be happy and fulfilled. You have an unlimited number of choices of movies, songs, games, tablets, phones, experiences, and relationships (real or virtual). Our online world is infinitely customizable too. Every website has a drop-down menu with more options. You can create and customize hundreds of playlists. Watch a single episode or binge an entire season on Netflix. You're in control of it all.

Choice, in and of itself, isn't bad, of course. But when so much of life is lived online, it's only a small jump to thinking that's the way all of reality should be as well. If you're trapped in the lie that choices are necessary prerequisites to happiness, two things result: First, rather than seizing the opportunities in front of you, you will always be looking for the next better thing. Second, addiction to choice leads to ungratefulness, never being satisfied with what you have. And a thankless heart is an unhappy one.

Lie #4: Information is all I need, not teachers.

Why ask for advice from others when you can just Google the answers to your questions? Why ask Mom and Dad, when Siri is always available? In the age of information, there's a huge temptation to ignore the wisdom of people around you or, worse, to think they don't have any. Gray hair used to indicate wisdom. Now it identifies someone who is out of touch.

But remember, don't confuse information with knowledge and completely forgo the pursuit of wisdom. A wise teacher, parent, youth leader, or mentor can help you separate the truth from error and pass along wisdom they've gained from years of experience. And the best teachers will help you to see everything in light of God's Story.

Avoid Being Alone Together

So how can you counter the tech tsunami engulfing your life? An obvious practical step is to limit screen time, especially with your smartphone. One way to do this is through a technology fast, a designated amount of time when you choose to go without something. Yes, we're serious! Take breaks from your phone, iPad, laptop, or television. Purposely unplug to gain control over your devices rather than have them control you.

Next, talk with your parents, friends, or an accountability partner about the idea and come up with a plan. Perhaps it's every day after dinner, Sunday afternoons, or one day a week. Use that time to read your Bible or a good book, spend time with family or friends, have face-to-face conversations, play games, play an instrument, paint, get outside, ride your bike, ride your skateboard, go on a hike, or do something active.

Here's another idea: establish device-free zones, times, and spaces where you unplug.

1. The car. Obviously, texting while driving is dangerous. More than that, however, rides to and from school, church, and shopping can be great times to connect with family, friends, and God.

2. The dinner table. Talk to your parents and siblings instead of immersing yourself in your own little digital world. Research says conversations and connections made at mealtimes can lead to your long-term success in life. ⁶

3. Bedrooms. According to a large national survey, 43 percent of teens in the United States reported sleeping less than seven hours a night. ⁷ That number increased 22 percent from 2012 to 2015. What caused this alarming rise of sleep deprivation? One word: smartphones.

Sleep experts say you need at least nine hours of sleep per night. A lack of sleep can hurt school performance, add to anxiety and depression, and even contribute to acne and other skin problems. Less sleep also leads to poor decisions. Privacy and a lack of accountability do so as well. With the privacy of a bedroom and internet pornography a click away, it's not surprising that pornography addiction is on the rise. Honestly, one of the most mature and wisest decisions you can make is keeping digital devices out of your bedroom.

4. Vacations. Going away as a family is one of the best opportunities for deep relationship building. Don't let your devices get in the way.

Is it easy to take breaks from technology? No. In this Information Age it's easy to get addicted to tech. So, it will take time and effort. But the payoff can be huge. Instead of letting technology shape you, you'll take the lead in controlling your technology. And we all need help with this, so get some. Talk with your parents, youth leader, or close friend about helping you set boundaries and limits and checking in periodically to see how you're doing.

Speaking of your parents, share your passwords with them. Sounds outrageous, huh? Some students would rather face a zombie apocalypse than give out their passwords. But no matter your age, we all need accountability. And to be accountable, you must be transparent. When you live your online life with nothing to hide, you'll experience true freedom. If your parents haven't asked you for your passwords, voluntarily give them the information. Then smile at their shocked expressions as you explain your desire to control your online life and honor God in every single area of your life.