

# In Constant Digital Contact, We Feel 'Alone Together'

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As soon as Sherry Turkle arrived at the studio for her *Fresh Air* interview, she realized she'd forgotten her phone. "I realized I'd left it behind, and I felt a moment of *Oh my god* ... and I felt it kind of in the pit of my stomach," she tells Terry Gross. That feeling of emotional dependence on digital devices is the focus of Turkle's research. Her book, *Alone Together*, explores how new technology is changing the way we communicate with one another.

"The pull of these devices is so strong, that we've become used to them faster than anyone would have suspected," says Turkle, a clinical psychologist and the founder of MIT's [Initiative on Technology and Self](#). Her research investigates how devices are changing the way parents relate to their children, how friends interact, and why many people — both young and old — keep their devices in-hand all the time — even as they sleep.

## Alone Together

Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other

by Sherry Turkle

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When Turkle asked teens and adults why they preferred text messaging over face-to-face conversation, they responded that when you're face to face, "you can't control what you are going to say, and you don't know how long it's going to take or where it could go." But Turkle believes that these perceived weaknesses of conversation are actually conversation's strengths. Face-to-face interaction teaches "skills of negotiation, of reading each other's emotion, of having to face the complexity of confrontation, dealing with complex emotion," Turkle says. She thinks people who feel they are too busy to have conversations in person are not making the important emotional connections they otherwise would.

All this leads to Turkle's theory that it is possible to be in constant digital communication and yet still feel very much alone. In Turkle's interviews with adults and teenagers, she found people of all ages are drawn to their devices for a similar reason: "What is so seductive about texting, about keeping that phone on, about that little red light on the BlackBerry, is you want to know who wants you," Turkle says.

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## Interview Highlights

On young children using digital devices

"Children are getting these phones earlier and earlier.

- **Psychologist Sherry Turkle**

These are years when children need to develop this capacity for solitude, this capacity to feel complete playing alone. If you don't have a capacity for solitude, you will always be lonely, and my concern is that the tethered child never really feels that sense that they are sort of OK unto themselves; and I talk to college students who've grown up with the habit of being in touch with their parents five, 10, 15 times a day. And it's no longer Huckleberry Finn as a model of adolescence, you know, sailing down the Mississippi alone — we've developed a model of adolescence and childhood where we sail down the Mississippi together with our families in tow."



Peter Urban/Basic Books

Sherry Turkle is the founder of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self. Her previous books include *Simulation and Its Discontents* and *Life on the Screen*.

### More On Digital Communication



digital life

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### On the effect of Facebook on teen identity

"[Teens] felt that on Facebook their life story followed them through their lives in a way that their older brothers and sisters were allowed to start fresh when they moved from elementary school to junior high, from junior high to high school, and then crucially from high school to college. And one said to me, 'My god, it used to be you that when you went to college, you got a chance to start fresh, to be a new person. I bet that was great.' And I think that this sense of the Facebook identity as something that follows you all your life is something that many adolescents feel is a burden.

"And I think there's another thing about the Facebook identity and adolescence, which is that many adolescents used to play with identity, play with multiple identities in adolescence, and that used to kind of be their fun, and now there's one identity that counts — it's the Facebook identity. And I think many adolescents are also feeling the pressure of that. So there are many things about the new technology that's changing the nature of adolescence, and I think that the complaints of adolescents about the new technology are — it's a long list, even as they're working with it."

### On why we text

"It used to be that people had a way of dealing with the world that was basically, 'I have a feeling, I want to make a call.' Now I would capture a way of dealing with the world, which is: 'I want to have a feeling, I need to send a text.' That is, with this immediate ability to connect and almost pressure to ... because you're holding your phone, you're constantly with your phone, it's almost like you don't know your thoughts and feelings until you connect. And that again is something that I really didn't see until texting. You know, kids are sending out texts all the time. First it was every few minutes, now it's many times a minute."

### On why cyberbullying can feel easier than face-to-face bullying

"It all stems from the same thing — which is that when we are face to face — and this is what I think is so ironic about Facebook being called Facebook, because we are not face to face on Facebook ... when we are face to face, we are inhibited by the presence of the other. We are inhibited from aggression by the presence of another face, another person. We're



technology

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aware that we're with a human being. On the Internet, we are disinhibited from taking into full account that we are in the presence of another human being."

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**Michael Difani** · 4 days ago

Yes, I'm an old coot just over 70 who is astounded at the number of adults under 50 who are on their gizmos (texting, talking, scrolling, etc) much of the time. I have an aluminum cane that I call my "iProd", to poke those "adults" who have a problem talking to me eye to eye, man to man. Until a few yrs. ago most of the human race was content to be alone at times with their own thoughts and pleasures, without some digital gizmo in their hand, right? I've seen couples with kids at an upscale eatery spending most of the time looking down at their gizmos, not even engaged with their children. Yikes! Of course, the kids are doing the same.

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**D Scully** · 2 days ago · parent

When I realized that you can't be plugged in all of the time and actually have a deep thought, I was out.

I quickly realized that the gadgets were like Soma in the Brave New World.

You aren't missing anything at all.

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