“What everyone realizes once they disconnect is the world doesn’t stop when you log off.”

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Untangling Your Digital Life (While Embracing It)
LL Cool J on Being a ‘Tethered Soul’
Apple’s Tempting New Phones and Watch
A Slightly Smarter Smartwatch
Confessions of a Smartphone Thief
It wasn’t until I was lying on a doctor’s exam table that I realized just how much I was suffering from FOMO — fear of missing out.

As the surgeon worked on my arm, I turned and looked up at the ceiling. My limb was so heavily anesthetized a shark could have been gnawing on it, and I wouldn’t have flinched. But there was another reason I wasn’t paying attention: the buzzing in my pants. Because this was a simple elective surgery, I didn’t need to change out of my clothes — and I got to keep my smartphone — and it was buzzing and buzzing.

The doctor swapped out surgical tools and made a noise that normally would have made me look, but I was focused on the now unnatural silence of my device. I couldn’t stop myself from asking, “Hey, can I check my email?”

BY ROGER CHENG
US smartphone users spend 162 minutes on their devices every day.

Unplugging her devices for 24 hours on the weekend has “had a profound effect on my happiness,” says Webby Awards founder Tiffany Shlain.

The doctor didn’t even think about his answer. “No,” he said and began doing up my stitches. Looking back, I realize it was an idiotic request. But can you blame me?

Reacting to that buzz — it could be an important email or text message, a fascinating tweet, or an artsy Instagram photo — is a compulsion for smartphone addicts like me. This tiny, powerful, pocket-sized computer is a connection to a vast digital frontier.

“I don’t last seven minutes without looking at my iPhone,” admits Shaquille O’Neal, former NBA superstar and now on-air basketball analyst. “I can’t take a break from my iPhone.”

As a society, we’ve become hooked on gadgets and the social identities we live out in the digital world. This tangle of connectivity is only getting more complex. In addition to smartphones, tablets have become our couch companions, and laptops rule at work. Pretty soon, we’ll all have smartwatches strapped to our wrists, text messages beamed to our retinas via smartglasses, and sensors in our clothes telling us we’ve been in the sun too long. Electronics makers are busy building cars, refrigerators, thermostats, and other smart appliances that will talk back to us.

But all that talking may be one-sided. The more we’re engaged with our devices, the more we risk isolating ourselves from the real world. Employers who ask that we’re on call 24/7, our FOMO on online water cooler discussions, and our inexplicable (and misguided) belief that being connected means we’re productive are turning our eyes away from the physical world toward the ones playing out on our screens. Plus, children are journeying into

THE SPORTING CONNECTION: Playing fair in a hyperconnected world

Nick Foles
NFL QUARTERBACK
“It’s crazy how people’s communication skills have gone way down as technology has risen.”

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Shaquille O’Neal
FORMER NBA SUPERSTAR
“I don’t last seven minutes without looking at my iPhone.”
that world at younger and younger ages.

“Our network life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other,” notes MIT professor Sherry Turkle in her book, “Alone Together,” about the relationship between humans and technology.

Are we doomed to a Matrix-like, plugged-in-from-birth fate? Not necessarily. While many preach the virtues of moderation and occasionally unplugging, just as many believe our newfound access to the wider digital world is the best thing to ever happen to humans.

“I grew up in rural Wisconsin, pretty much as disconnected as you can get in the US. And the difference between not being connected versus being connected for me is everything,” says Internet browser pioneer Marc Andreessen, who now helps run Silicon Valley venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz. “It’s how do you learn? It’s why do you communicate? It’s how do you work? It’s how do you play? It’s just so much better to be connected.”

But even ardent technologists, Andreessen included, acknowledge we need to find the right balance. It’s doable. It just may not be easy.

From FOMO to absorption

Whenever Scott Keeney, better known as DJ Skee, is on a flight, he feels anxious. A recent three-hour trip to Silicon Valley from Kansas City felt like eight hours. It isn’t fear of flying that prompts his dread; it’s lack of Wi-Fi.

“You feel like the world ends when you don’t have connectivity,” says the host of the “Skee Live” show on AXS TV.

Actor and musician LL Cool J doesn’t consider himself an addict, “but I definitely go all out to maintain my connection.”

Vivek Wadhwa, a scholar at Singularity University, is so afraid of being disconnected he packs a laptop, iPhone 5, and backup iPhone 4S wherever he goes. "God forbid, I be without my backup."

YouTube blogger and Internet personality Connor Franta feels a buzz when nothing is buzzing — a phenomenon known as phantom vibration syndrome.

And he’s stunned when he reaches for his smartphone, only to find a blank screen.

“We’ve totally reoriented our brains,” says Larry Rosen, a psychology professor at California State University, Dominguez Hills and author of “iDisorder.” “Instead of thinking of it as an itch that needs to be scratched, we think of it as an alert or notification coming in that we have to attend to right now.”

Rosen believes FOMO is the driving force behind that anxiety. Earlier this year, researchers from the Boston Medical Center published a study after observing 55 groups of parents and children eating dinner at fast food restaurants. A majority of adults were focused more on the mobile devices than their children, with some reacting angrily when their kids asked for attention.

Parents who use their mobile devices shared a common trait, says Dr. Jenny Radesky, a pediatrician and one of the study’s researchers. They seemed “absorbed” by the phone.

“T’ve learned in life to pay attention to the vital few,” says John Paul DeJoria of Paul Mitchell.

Steven Jackson, a running back for the Atlanta Falcons, was a typical gadget guy, obsessing over the latest and greatest. No longer. He doesn’t spend more than an hour a day on his phone and is content with his iPhone 5S.

“I don’t want to be influenced by anything that’s trending,” he says. “I’m trying to stay on course with what I have planned for myself.”

Jackson’s single-mindedness may be an anomaly in a world where people are expected — or think they have to — juggle many responsibilities at the same time.

“Subtly, over time, multitasking, once seen as something of a blight, was recast as a virtue,” MIT professor Sherry Turkle writes. “The conversation about its virtues became extravagant, with young people close to lionized for their ability to do many things at once.”

Yet multitasking may do more harm than good. Technology expert Linda Stone, who spent nearly 20 years at Apple and Microsoft, coined the term “continuous partial attention” to describe how multitasking has shortened our attention span as a society. Stone believes we can reverse the problem by better understanding our priorities.

It helps to disconnect every once in awhile.

Then, there’s quilting cold turkey. John Paul DeJoria, a billionaire entrepreneur and the face of Paul Mitchell hair styling products, primarily makes phone calls and doesn’t do email. “I’ve learned in life to pay attention to the vital few, ignore the trivial many.”

Still, few are likely to follow in DeJoria’s footsteps.
And you can forget about the 40-hour workweek. Thanks to constant access to email through our mobile gear, employees feel compelled to check in during off-hours. "You don't want to be that guy who misses the email chain and holds everyone up," says Bob Sullivan, a founding member of MSNBC who's now researching a book on technology's effect on our downtime.

And these folks aren't even that extreme. "People have actually answered a phone call in the middle of an interview," notes Matthew Randall, executive director of the center for professional excellence at York College in Pennsylvania. "Seriously."

A balancing act
Sarah Kimmel juggling her job as an IT manager with updating her Tech4Moms blog. During the day, she's navigating five screens. At night, she blogs on her tablet. But she also sets boundaries. Her kids' bedrooms, for instance, are technology-free zones.

"When I walk through my door where my kids are, it's a force field where my phone can't go with me," Kimmel says.

For Mark Cuban, owner of the Dallas Mavericks basketball team and an Internet entrepreneur, juggling the need to be connected with being a decent human being isn't complicated. "Pay attention to what is happening around you and to the people you know, work with, and love."

People have even started to make a game out of managing their digital stuff. One involves everyone putting their phones on the dinner table. The first to reach for their device picks up the tab.

Debra Fine, an etiquette expert and former engineer, says it may be OK to use your phone if you excuse yourself or ask permission. But it's not OK to check email during dinner or over drinks. "It's like I'm sitting at the table looking at the door to see if anyone better is going to come in," Fine says.

But for the younger generation, using phones around each other might be OK. "That type of interaction will feel as natural to them as another generation having a cup of coffee," LL Cool J says. "Values change."

It's easy to understand why we fall in love with our gadgets. A smartphone is always with you. It acts as a lifeline to friends and family; serves up news from around the globe and gossip from your inner circle; and lets you play videos, music, or games when you're bored. In the US, we spend two hours and 42 minutes a day on our smartphones, according to mobile analytics firm Flurry. That's as much time as it would take to watch last year's "Hobbit" movie.

"Use common good sense," adds Joe Bastianich, restaurateur and judge on the reality shows "Masterchef" and "Masterchef Junior." For example, he points out, "when you are having dinner with someone on a social occasion, you wouldn't open up Time magazine at the dinner table and start on the cover story, would you?"

Give me a break
When Tiffany Shlain's father died five years ago, it was the wake-up call she needed to realize she'd gotten sucked in by tech and wasn't spending enough time with family. She experimented with a "technology Shabbat," having her husband and kids unplug their devices between Friday evening and Saturday afternoon.

They continue the practice this day. "It's had a profound effect on my happiness," says Shlain, founder of the Webby Awards and star of the AOL online show "The Future Starts Here."

What she realized, and what everyone realizes once they disconnect, is the world doesn't stop when you log off. People learned to adjust to her Shabbat.

But taking a break from your gadgets
"Fear of missing out" might drive absorption with devices, but the blurring of our personal, professional, and online lives — and the ease with which we can move between them — has driven our addiction.

"Your personal brand is the brand that you're putting out there for work," believes Dana Ward, co-host of ClevverTV, a top entertainment news channel on YouTube. "Our viewers have come to know us personally — or at least they feel like they know us personally."

With more than 1 million subscribers on YouTube, Ward and co-host Joslyn Davis have figured out how to blend their digital and real-life personas. But a study by Emerson College on the role of the mobile device in students' lives found a strong dependence on mobile devices. One student even admitted to taking better care of a relationship with a phone than with people.

"The truth is that we are more connected than ever, even though we're not getting that face-to-face time," Davis says.

Nick Foles, quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles, sees a difference in the way people react when he meets them in person versus how they portray themselves on Twitter or in texts. A person's digital persona is more outgoing — often, more outrageous. "They're completely different," he says. "It's crazy how people's communication skills have gone way down as technology has risen."

So are people, particularly kids and teens, absorbed in their gear to the point that they're missing out on real life? Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban chalks it up to a lack of maturity. "The younger you are, the more time you have to kill," he says. "As you age and time becomes more valuable, online is more about productivity and information."

Cuban's prediction: Kids will be just fine.

We are more connected than ever even though we're not getting that face-to-face time," says Joslyn Davis, co-host of ClevverTV on YouTube.

Problem and solution

Dr. Radesky conducted a study on smartphone absorption, but she's an admitted gadget enthusiast too. One of her favorite pastimes is watching YouTube videos on how things are made with her son on her iPad. "We're both geeks," she says.

Shaq says he constantly checks his phone because it acts as his secretary, calendar, alarm, and office.

Franta, with nearly 3 million YouTube subscribers, pegs his success on the more than 1 billion connected devices being used today in the world. "Everything I am is because of the Internet," he quips.

That's the thing about mobile devices: While there's a risk of being compulsive about them, they do plenty of good.

"These screens connect you to the world. That's such a big deal," Andreessen says. "One of the things I've taken to saying is, whatever's on the screen in your hand is probably more interesting and more important than whatever's happening around you."

Agonizing about being too connected is really a first-world problem, he believes. In developing countries, a smartphone may change someone's life for the better, giving them a lifeline to the outside world for the first time. Connected devices help sick or homebound people with mobility issues and allow soldiers abroad to stay in touch with their families back home.

And seen through the lens of history, the connected world isn't so scary. In the 1800s, the photograph prompted anxiety because people, used to paintings and sketches, couldn't cope with the idea of a photo-realistic image that was mechanically reproduced. Sound familiar?

"We forget how fast this has all changed," Andreessen says, recalling that when he was a kid, telephone party lines shared by neighbors were the norm, and that it wasn't too long ago that long-distance calls cost $1 an minute. "It's just so much better than how things were."

Roger Cheng (@RogerWCheng) manages CNET's mobile, social, digital media, and Apple coverage — and when he can, binge-watches TV shows on Netflix and sleeps (often at the same time).

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