

When Using Digital Devices Becomes an Addiction



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In the hit Pixar movie *Inside Out*, a character sorts through memories like books in a library; discarding the memories deemed no longer useful. One memory in particular – phone numbers – is thrown into a pit, lost for good. Why? Because in today's world, phone numbers are stored in our digital devices, no longer committed to memory.

The moment in the movie is comical but illustrates the world we live in today. Students, in particular, have come of age in a society where digital is the norm. Computer screens and Internet searches are as common as letterhead and postage stamps were before binary code clouded our vision. Research findings from Common Sense Media show media use of 8- to 12-year-olds is now more than six hours per day. And a Pew Research study found a quarter of teenagers are online almost constantly. In addition, among 12- to 17-year-olds, texting has become the primary means of communication, outpacing human contact. The trends continue for young adults as they enter into higher education. So long, analog, we barely

knew you. Though the transition to a digital world fell at the snap of a finger, with it brought new benefits and challenges for students and their parents across the country.

The benefits of a migration to a digital space are two-fold: students see their social lives broaden while parents of students see it as direct communication, or a way of keeping a watchful eye on their burgeoning youth. Before cellphones, how did parents know their child snuck out to see that forbidden band or watch that R-rated movie? Now with a cellphone on the hip of every student, parents see a direct link to knowing the whereabouts of their children on any given day. The research I completed at the University of San Diego indicated that college-aged girls will talk to their mothers as much as seven times a day while college-aged boys are much more reluctant to call. Either way, families are growing accustomed to their student having a phone – it's a safety net, a personal GPS for their young adults' location. Ask any parent and they'll tell you they view that as comfort. But is it? As an interventionist, I have learned that the phone can be a direct dial to more nefarious goings-on—a call to the local drug dealer, fast line to sketchy Internet sites, and direct dial to places we would rather not have our young adults go.

On the plus side, the benefits of a steady digital presence go beyond the parents and can have a direct impact on the student engaging with digital devices. Jim Taylor, Ph.D., recently commented on the affects of digital media on young adults in *Psychology Today*, claiming, "research shows, for example, video games and other screen media improve visual-spatial capabilities, increase attention ability, reaction times, and the capacity to identify details among clutter." As such, we're seeing the different ways young adults are adapting to the digitally saturated environment they were raised in. Like the

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example in the opening, students today won't memorize phone numbers; rather, they access them with their digital devices. This is a much different approach children and young adults are taking than when their parents were growing up. Taylor continues, "It only stands to reason that knowing where to look is becoming more important than actually knowing something. But how does this shift from knowing to engaging change the way young adults learn and grow?" Not having to retain information in our brain may allow us to engage in more "higher-order" processing, such as contemplation, critical thinking, and problem solving." So the digital space and the devices that allow us to engage in it may be seen simply as tools. And it has become incumbent

upon young adults to possess the knowledge to use these tools to succeed in society.

But what happens when these tools, or digital devices, overtake the user? This is where the battleground is taking place, and it affects parents and students alike. For students, it's increasingly concerning how young adults are spending too much time connected to digital media and not enough time interacting with their physical environment, using their imagination, and engaging in face-to-face interaction. Spending too much time on digital devices actually stunts one's ability to engage in meaningful relationships, a crucial skill to learn and practice in adolescence. Furthermore, staying locked in a virtual world takes away the simple



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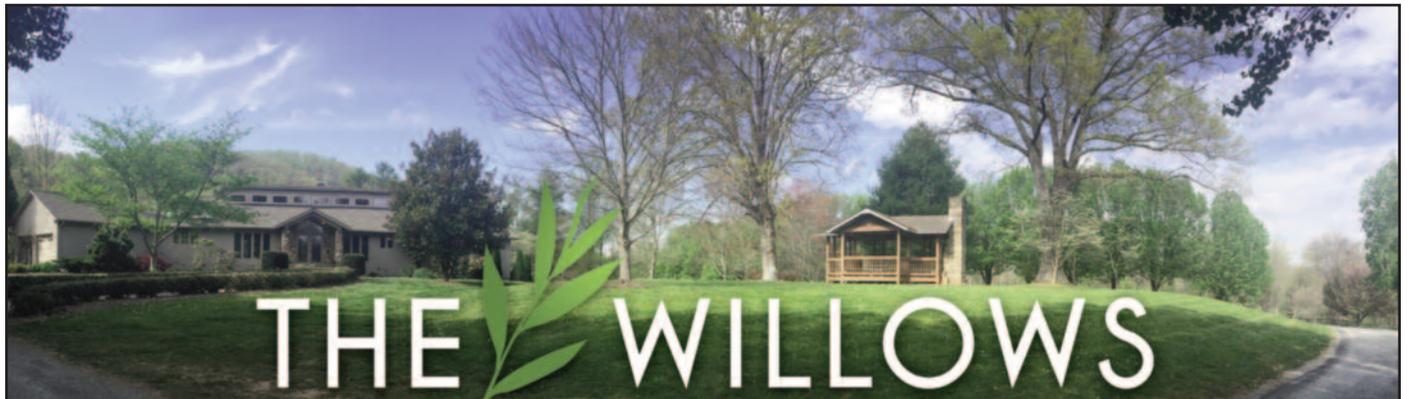
pleasures of being outside in the sunshine, feeling fresh air on your face, and seeing the beauty of our physical world.

In some instances, the connection to digital devices may lead to addiction or high-risk behaviors. Like food or sex, digital addiction is a process disorder in which one must learn to live with healthy moderation, as one cannot be totally void of connectivity. Addiction is a two-way street. Over-connectivity may lead to a process Internet disorder, which may then trigger a substance abuse disorder (either newly discovered or recurring) that may lead to other process disorders, such as gambling, which is widespread on the Internet or vice versa.

In other cases, digital media is used as a distraction. Screen distraction helps the users escape from their larger fears – fears that their life isn't on track and that so much is broken in the world and it's falling apart. In my research on the subject, I discovered emotions connected to smartphone addiction

– discomfort, annoyance, fear, panic, desire, anxiety, and shame. These are the signs that a student or young adult may be experiencing a process disorder caused by Internet addiction. These emotions grow as students and other young adults increase their digital device usage, and, in turn, a cycle of distraction and fear forms.

For parents, the cycle of digital device abuse takes a similar form, but may have different consequences. Parents raising children are bombarded with a kaleidoscope of media options that call to them like a winning slot machine. And it is how parents engage with media that often predicts how the child will consume and interact with media as they mature into young adults and attend higher learning institutions. So a parent with a healthy relationship with the digital space will sew those seeds for the next generation. Furthermore, a parent's unhealthy relationship with media may go beyond the child's learned patterns with technology and can directly impact parents'



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relationship with their child. Sherry Turkle writes in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* that parents and caretakers are guilty of being emotionally unavailable while in the presence of their loved ones. They are texting while talking! This proves that old adage that parenthood is like holding a mirror up to one's true self.

If everyone is culpable – parents and young adults alike – of opening Pandora's digital box, how can we find a balance? It is important to call out that our relationship with media, like everything we do in life, is a journey ripe with triumph and strife. The key is to focus on progress and not perfection. Researchers and health experts suggest starting at an early age. Ideas include having digital-free family meals or turning off cell phones for a while. It wasn't long ago that the same was said about television. Our eyeballs have simply turned to different screens. Parents also can create a gadget-free zone in your

homes, limit checking email, and prioritize your online presence. These few simple tricks will put in place boundaries for a much healthier intake of digital media, as well as instill guidelines in children and young adults for their own interaction in our increasingly digital world. Because no matter how you shake it, there will never be a replacement for face-to-face interaction.

If you suspect you or a loved one might have an addiction to digital devices, check out Dr. Louise Stanger's website allaboutinterventions.com for a screening quiz. 🌈



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