How Technology Is Killing Eye Contact

The Huffington Post | by Carolyn Gregoire

Pat Christen had an alarming wake-up call one day about the toll that technology was taking on her life -- and her family.

"I realized several years ago that I had stopped looking in my children's eyes," the HopeLab President and CEO said at a Huffington Post panel at Ad Week on Tuesday. "And it was shocking to me."

Christen's "a-ha" moment was an alarming one, but it's more common than you might think -- and it points toward a larger, and often undiscussed, byproduct of excessive screen time. The decline of eye contact is well-documented, and as we spend more and more of our time staring at screens, there's less time left over to look into people's eyes -- including the eyes of the people we care about most.

Between staring at computers during the work day and regularly gazing down at our phones, Americans spending more time with their eyes glued to their screens than ever before. According to recent estimates, the average American spends more than five hours per day using digital devices on computers and mobile devices (the number is higher, of course, for those who work in front of computer screens), and another four and a half hours watching television. Additionally, the average mobile user checks his or her phone 150 times a day (that's every six and a half minutes), and one recent survey found that young people in Britain spend more time each day on average on their phones than with their partners (119 vs. 97 minutes).

A Wall Street Journal article published in May, "Just Look Me In The Eye Already," cast a light on how technology use has affected our eye contact -- and the sizable toll that reducing eye contact during conversations could take on our relationships.

According to Quantified Impressions, a Texas-based communications analytics company, an adult makes eye contact between 30 and 60 percent of the time in a typical conversation, but emotional connection is built when eye contact is made during 60-70 percent of the conversation. In other words, the less eye contact, the less of a connection is made.

The growth of multitasking on mobile devices (i.e. sending email during dinner) and remote working -- in which conversations are mostly held over the phone -- have normalized the experience of having conversations with little or no eye contact, Noah Zandan, president of Quantified Impressions, told the Wall Street Journal.

"All too often we're like cornered animals with our eyes darting from device to human and back to device," Daniel Sieberg, author of "The Digital Diet: The Four-Step Plan To Break Your Tech Addiction And Regain Balance In Your Life," tells The Huffington Post. "Eye contact can be especially meaningful in today's world of constant partial attention and it conveys a sentiment that the person you're with matters. Taking that extra time when possible can really yield benefits with face-to-face interaction."

However, most of us have become accustomed to conversations where digital devices interrupt eye contact: You're in a conversation with an acquaintance whose gaze is directed down at a screen while you're speaking, a friend jumps into the dinner conversation without looking up from the text she's composing, or you catch yourself nodding along to your daughter's story while reading an email. These interactions aren't just what previous generations would have considered rude: They're also undermining our ability to connect with the people in our lives.

"You're not going to connect deeply with someone who is distracted," Daniel Goleman, author of the forthcoming book "Focus," tells The Huffington Post, explaining that declining eye contact signals that we're giving less attention to the people we're communicating with. In many cases, those are the people who are most important to us.

The importance of eye contact in human relationships, whether at the workplace or in any other setting, is difficult to underestimate. According to Psychology Today, it's the "strongest form of nonverbal communication." And according to a University of Miami study, over 43 percent of the attention we focus on someone is devoted to their eyes. It also plays a critical role in the development of emotional connections.

University of Aberdeen researchers found that when a group of people were presented with photos of two faces that were nearly identical -- the only difference was that in one photo, the eyes were looking away, while the other's eyes looked into the camera -- subjects judged the faces with direct gaze to be more attractive and likable, the Telegraph reported.

"Eye contact, although it occurs over a gap of yards, is not a metaphor," psychiatrists Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon write in "A General Theory Of Love." "When we meet the gaze of another, two nervous systems achieve a palpable and intimate apposition."

Largely for this reason, the issue of declining eye contact has become a matter of concern among parents. Recently, comedian Louis C.K. told Conan O'Brien that he wouldn't be letting his daughters get smartphones.

"I think these things are toxic, especially for kids," C.K. said. "They don't look at people when they talk to them and they don't build empathy."

Many parents are concerned about what their own digital multitasking and lack of eye contact might be communicating to their children. Like Christen, blogger Rachel Marie Martin had a major realization about how important it was for her to look her children in the eyes.

"Nothing tells another person you matter more than looking at them in the eyes while they talk. It shows that what they are saying truly is important to you," Martin wrote in a recent blog post, "20 Things I Will Regret Not Doing With My Kids." "I want my kids to remember that there where times when their mother looked them in the eye and smiled. And for me this often means shutting my laptop, putting down my phone, stopping my list, and just giving them time."

As Goleman explains, communicating attention in this way is crucial to developing strong relationships, whether between friends, coworkers or parents and their children.

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