



FAMILY



You may have thousands of friends on social media, but are they really people you can talk to? Photo: AFP

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Are you lonely even with thousands of friends on social media?

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Technology may make us feel more connected than ever; most people are just a call, text or tweet away. But does this actually make us closer?

"Even as the quantity of our connections with other people is on the rise, the quality of our connections is often taking a turn for the worse," Kory Floyd, professor of communication at the University of Arizona, writes in his book, *The Loneliness Cure: Six Strategies For Finding Real Connections In Your Life* (Adams Media).

Our increasing tendency to communicate electronically has left many starved for affection. We're deprived of hugs, smiles and literal shoulders to cry on.

"It's easy to fall into patterns of pseudoconnection and quasi-intimacy that initially feel gratifying but ultimately leave us feeling less than satisfied," said Joseph B. Dilley, psychologist and author of *The Game Is Playing Your Kid: How To Unplug And Reconnect In The Digital Age* (Bascos Hill Publishing Group).

You may have 1,000 Facebook friends, but how many of them could you confide in about the worries that keep you up at night? Just because an old college friend likes a photo of your cat on Instagram doesn't mean he or she is down to listen to you complain about work.



Social media has its benefits but it can deprive us from having physical contact with real people. Photo: Shutterstock

"We know the minute details of what we're doing moment to moment in the day, but that comes at the expense of being able to invest in each other in longer-term and more intimate ways," Floyd said. And, he writes in his book, "We end up glorifying the trivial... while barely noticing the substantive and meaningful are missing."

People struggle to connect "emotionally and interpersonally" when so much of our communication happens in digital form, said Dr Lisa Strohman, founder and director of the Technology Wellness Center in Scottsdale, Arizona, the United States. "(When) our communication is

reduced to 140 characters, we lose patience and compassion to have in-depth emotional connections with others."

Technology, of course, has countless benefits, but when it comes to communication it can "become a crutch when used as the only form of social contact one has," said Erika Martinez, a clinical psychologist based in Miami. Some people may prefer interacting online or via text because they feel less vulnerable that way.

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"Interacting in person scares some people because they're afraid of rejection, ridicule or judgment by others," Martinez said.

Those with social anxiety may feel more comfortable online because it allows them to present the best versions of themselves. They can deliberate over every word and make sure every photo is near-perfection. But logging on to the Internet, especially social media, to find companionship can backfire.

"People find themselves comparing their lives with others more and more, which can then create anxiety, depression and more intense feelings of loneliness," Strohman said. Seeing photos of friends out together or learning about others' successes online can make us feel even lonelier or depressed.

Smartphones are the ultimate adult pacifier. They allow us to get lost anytime, anywhere in pockets of the Internet, and they rescue us from ever being alone with our thoughts.

They can also cause people to feel alone when they're together.

Devoting tech-free time to the people you love is crucial, said Ben Michaelis, clinical psychologist and author of *Your Next Big Thing: Ten Small Steps To Get Moving And Get Happy* (Wolf Street Press). That means spending time with the people who matter most, without using your phone for distraction.

"The deepest forms of connection are still face to face," Michaelis said. "We read each other's face and body language; we appreciate context and nuance in ways that flat communications that come through our computers and devices don't allow."



When people feel lonely, they tend to exercise less, drink more, smoke and eat more calories. Photo: Shutterstock

Several years ago, Floyd conducted a survey for skincare products firm Nivea on how Americans felt about affection and touch. The results showed that 3 in 4 adults agreed that "Americans are in a state of affection hunger." People reported having more physical contact with their cellphones than other people.

Even if we put down our laptops, tablets and phones, we may still seek out technology to distract us from being truly together, focused on each other.

"Sitting on the couch at night watching TV while you sit next to your significant other is not quality time," Strohman said.

Humans are social creatures, so we don't just enjoy social interactions and relationships, we need them, Floyd said.

"When people feel deprived of meaningful connection with others, they don't take care of themselves as well as they should," Floyd writes. Lonely people tend to exercise less, drink more, are more likely to smoke and eat more of their daily calories as fat, Floyd says in his book. They are also more likely to have sleep disorders, chronic pain or a weaker immune system.

So what can we do to not feel so alone? One of the best ways to invite more affection is to give more, Floyd said. Invite people over or to do activities with you, like going for a hike or out to dinner.

And when you do have the chance to spend time with someone, for goodness' sake, put down your phone. – Chicago Tribune/Tribune News Service

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