



communication OVERLOAD

Society's obsession with being 'connected' around-the-clock is doing more harm than good

by Christie Judson

Whether it's a ding, three boings, a guitar strum, the marimba or crickets, today it seems perfectly normal to have a pocketful of gadgets calling out for our immediate attention – and sometimes all at the same time.

With instant 24/7 access to email, texts, calls and the Internet at our fingertips, most of us believe that being "connected" around the clock increases our productivity and aids in our ability to multi-task.

But not so, according to Dr. Sherrie Bourg Carter, a psychologist in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., who specializes in stress-related concerns. The author of *High Octane Women: How Superachievers Can Avoid Burnout* says that

when "connectivity" is not contained and controlled, it actually reduces productivity.

"We've become conditioned to respond to all the bells, dings and whistles as quickly as we can when they go off," says Bourg Carter. "The pressure that most of us feel to respond to emails within 'X' amount of time, which usually is very short, or respond to a text, or answer a cellphone call, adds stress to our lives. "And goodness forbid if a battery dies on one of our gadgets!"

In short, Bourg Carter explains that while they have brought many good things into our lives, technological advances come with a price: increased stress in lives that she says may have already been stressed to begin with.

Her sentiments are echoed in a recent Cambridge University study, which indicates that nearly a third of the participants felt overwhelmed by technology in their daily lives. However, like any other bad habit, Bourg Carter points out that people have the power to take control of their gadgets and make them work for them, instead of the other way around. Regardless of its source, Bourg Carter says stress causes a wide range of symptoms, which can be broken down into three basic categories:

- Physical: fatigue, headaches, aches and pains, gastrointestinal problems, chest pains, rapid heartbeat, loss of sex drive and/or frequent sickness.

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- Behavioural: overeating or undereating, nervous habits (nail biting, tics, etc.), isolating yourself from others, sleeping too much or too little, neglecting responsibilities and/or using alcohol or drugs to relax.

- Psychological: anxiety, depression, poor judgment and/or feelings of helplessness or hopelessness.

"People need breaks," she said. "Our bodies need time to replenish and recover from all the energy we use up."

For those feeling the effects of being "overconnected," Bourg Carter offers the following 12 easy tips to help you unplug and de-stress – while increasing your productivity:

- Admit that you've become way too dependent on being constantly connected. While it may sound cliché, the first step to recovering from anything is acknowledging there's a problem.

- Recognize that you have the power to change, and make a commitment to turn your overconnected life around.

- Make a list of all the ways you're connected. Include all the gadgets that connect you, but also all the ways that you connect on your gadgets.

- Using this list, highlight the ones that you must keep – such as something you need for work or other responsibilities.

- Using the same list, scratch off the gadgets/websites/apps that you can live without and let them go. This may include selling or getting rid of a device, removing your bookmarks, deleting "favourites" and unsubscribing from unimportant or unnecessary electronic mailing lists.

- Pare down your contacts by disconnecting from people you don't know or don't know very well.

- Keep a log of how much time you spend on the gadgets/websites/apps that you didn't scratch off your list. If you're not using them as much as you thought, reconsider scratching them off your list.

- For the 'must-have' items, if possible, turn off all the dings, dongs, beeps and bells that emanate from them (unless, of course, responding immediately to something is part of your job). For those who are instant-communications "addicts," turning off the alerts may cause a bit of anxiety. However, just think of it as a necessary part of the recovery process!

- If you can't turn off alerts because they're a part of your job, speak to your boss (or have a



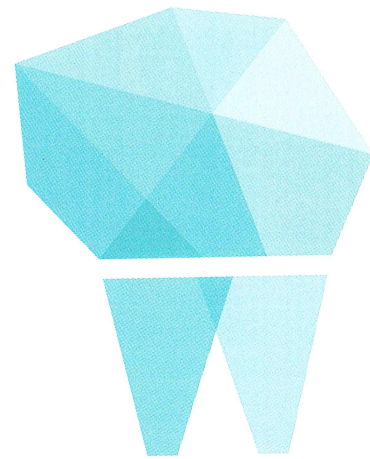
heart-to-heart with yourself if you're the boss) about expectations regarding how quickly you respond to alerts. If it's acceptable to respond within an hour, for example, set a schedule in which you check your messages only once an hour. Or set aside a specific amount of time each day to respond to emails. During that time, clean out your inbox as much as possible. The ultimate goal (and challenge) is to have an empty inbox at the end of your allotted email time.

- Plan your time online. Before you go online, make a list of what you need to accomplish, do those things – and then log off! Otherwise, you're likely to start surfing and get sidetracked.

- When working on a project, turn your IM status to "invisible," so that all contacts who have your name of their messenger lists see you as offline. Keep it there until you're finished the task.

- If possible (depending on your job and responsibilities), leave a message on your cellphone advising callers that you will respond to messages between the hours of (fill in the blank). This removes any expectation on the part of the caller that you will respond to them immediately – or even quickly – which gives you better control of your schedule. ①

For tips from South Surrey interior designer Karla Amadatsu on reducing the technology-related stress in your home, see pages 22-23.



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