

Article

What to Do with the Digitally Absorbed Communicator



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The eyes don't seem to have it anymore. As digital handheld devices continue to pervade every part of daily life, we are watching eye contact and attention span disappear. There is a dog named Dug, in last year's animated feature, "Up!," who is so easily distracted by squirrels that it becomes a running gag throughout the film. This resonated with pretty much everyone who watched the movie. The reason is simple. It is becoming everyone's experience.

Those of us who came of age without the "convenience" of these devices, have observed a distinct difference over the past couple of years. There's the struggle to make eye contact. There is the distracted mindset. There is the impatience to get on with whatever seems to be next. I have been fond of pointing out that many of us find ourselves competing for "share of mind" with all the other distractions that inhabit a Millennial's brain. But this is becoming true of others as well. When I walk up to the counter in a store and have to wait for the middle-aged clerk to finish reading her e-mails before acknowledging my presence, I know things have changed.

So what do you do with the individuals, young or old, who seem so absorbed in their handhelds that you feel superfluous in their presence? Three options seem to work for me:

Asking for their attention. While many in older generations are troubled by the perceived lack of courtesy, it is useless to assign blame. There's too much to go around. For most of us, it is human nature to wait for people to finish their thoughts or actions before talking. We have been taught that that is polite and it is appropriate to expect the same courtesy in return. Unfortunately, Millennials are the products of an over-stimulated, menu-driven world where Mom and Dad never really found the time to teach and enforce what used to be called manners.

I find that simply beginning by saying, "I need your attention here for a minute," is generally enough to capture their focus for the time you need. In a world where every other distraction pushes its way into their world, we need to assert ourselves as well. This includes parents, teachers, coaches, employers and anyone else.

Stopping, in mid-sentence if necessary. As much as there is talk that young people seem to be able to talk, text, drive, and play World of Warcraft all at the same time, the question is whether their attention span is a mile wide and an inch deep. Silence does not seem to be something that many of them can endure. If they drift away in mid-conversation, simply stop until they look up and make eye contact. This is usually enough to re-capture their undivided attention.

Walking away. Really! Nothing will snap them back to attention more than someone abandoning an exchange mid-stream. When they protest, I generally say something like, “Oh I’m sorry. You look so busy. I guess we should continue the conversation at another time.” There is nothing more powerful than a bit of well-placed sarcasm to express your expectation, especially if it’s coming from an employer. Do it once, twice, maybe three times and the behavior will change. If it doesn’t, that individual should not be long for the job because customers and coworkers are experiencing it as well.

The reality is that those around us will respond to us in the ways in which we train them. If we react to every “squirrel” that passes by, they will assume that it is okay to respond in kind, thus making the situation worse. On the other hand, if we can model the behavior we desire over time most will rise to meet our expectations. Take a step back from your own intensity to realize that you have more control over your environment than you think. It’s just a matter of exercising that control.

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