

Texting can be a positive and powerful force, experts say

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Three teenagers are lost in their phones while in Trafalgar Square in London, England. Photo by: In Pictures Ltd./Corbis via Getty Images

When texting tends to be in the news, people aren't usually singing its praises.

It often gets blamed for fostering social isolation or decreasing teens' attention spans. Other days, it's driving down self-esteem or damaging the spine — a phenomenon known as "text neck."

Still, some technological and medical experts say the negativity is unfair. Texting can and should be a positive force in people's lives, both in terms of emotional and physical health, they say — so long as it's used correctly.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) psychologist Sherry Turkle wrote the book "Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age," which analyzes how we communicate. She says "the problem really isn't that people have this new, interesting, intimate way of touching base ... the trouble is what happens to face-to-face conversation if your phone is always there."

If done well, Turkle and other experts said, texting can improve interpersonal relationships. It can also help people deal with traumatic events and connect different generations of people.

Medical Uses Of Texting

There are also medical uses. Texting eases the difficulty of communication with doctors, advances research as an easy and accurate way of gathering patient information in scientific studies, and can offer support to at-risk or suicidal individuals via instant-response crisis text lines.

Eric Topol is digital health expert at the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California. He admitted he's not a huge fan of texting — but said even he has been forced to acknowledge its benefits.

It all comes down to when and how you text, according to Turkle and Tchiki Davis, who studies, writes and consults on well-being technology. Both said there's one key rule of texting: Don't do it when you're around other people.

A No-No: Don't Bring Phones To The Dinner Table

If you're out to dinner with friends, put your phone away and keep it out of sight, Turkle said. Even leaving the turned-off phone visible on the table will make conversations more trivial and will reduce the possibility of "empathetic communication," Turkle said. She warned some people use texting to avoid difficult face-to-face interactions.

We should ask, "Is texting keeping me away from a necessary conversation?' If not, enjoy."

It's better to refrain from texting even around total strangers, Davis said. She mentioned that when commuting home from work at the end of a long day, people whip out their phones and disappear into their screens, ignoring their fellow passengers on the bus or the subway.

"A whole body of research shows we can improve your well-being even through just tiny interactions with strangers," Davis said.

Reaching Out In Time Of Need

Once you're truly alone, go ahead and break out your phone, Turkle and Davis said — but be thoughtful about who and what you text. Think of texting friends and family and consider who might be feeling lonely or confronting a difficult situation.

If you yourself are struggling, texting a loved one is a great way to handle it, Davis said.

"Studies have shown that people who text and reach out to others experience less pain," Davis said. "It can be used to cope and just kind of deal with challenging situations."

Try not to gossip via text, Davis says. Write longer, fuller messages to reduce the chance the receiver misreads something you've sent. Text your friends memes or videos you think they'd find amusing. Use more exclamation points.

Keeping Parents In The Loop

Turkle said texting is an especially good way for parents to connect with their adult children. Turkle's daughter recently went shopping for a wedding dress without Turkle, so she sent her

mom pictures of different dresses.

Turkle said the messages made her feel close to her daughter.

More and more doctors, scientific researchers and mental-health advocates are using texting in their everyday work and are realizing its benefits, Topol said.

For physicians and their patients, texting offers a quick and non-intrusive way of getting in touch. Turkle remembered one night recently when she noticed a rash on her leg. It would have been a "big deal" to call her doctor past 9 p.m. at night — so instead, she texted him a picture of the rash and asked whether she needed to visit the emergency room.

He quickly replied, "You ate something, don't worry," Turkle said. She thinks "sending photographs is going to be a big part of the future of medicine."

The ease, speed, and universality of texting also makes it powerful for research, Topol said. Over the course of the past five years, texting has been used to collect information in dozens of important health studies.

It Allows Immediate Feedback, Help

It's easy to gather data because 70 percent of the world likely has cellphones, which makes it easier for participants to get involved and respond to researchers.

It allows for immediate feedback. People are also more likely to reply to a text than an email.

Texting is also affecting the mental-health world. In recent years, suicide and mental-health support lines have been launched that exclusively offer text-based support.

Suicides usually result when a combination of events and circumstances make life temporarily unbearable. Mental health disorders or substance abuse are associated with most suicides. Often, family and friends do not recognize the warning signs or underlying mental health issues leading to a suicide.

Lean On Me offers an all-hours support service specifically targeted to help college students. The organization, launched in 2016 by current and former MIT students, connects texters with volunteer peer supporters. Since its founding, Lean On Me has expanded to seven college campuses, including MIT's.

"Sometimes students need a quick outlet to vent about their day, talk about a frustration, or simply hold a conversation," Lean On Me staffer Shaye Carver wrote in an email. "I don't think vulnerability necessarily requires face-to-face interaction. Texting allows users to respond in a minute or an hour and take as much time as they want to reflect on how they feel."

Texting Link With Art Museum

Others are using text lines in more whimsical ways. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in summer 2017 kicked off a program called "Send Me" that allows anyone to text the museum a request to see a particular item. In return, a computer algorithm sends the texter a piece of SFMOMA art that matches the requested item.

At the height of the craziness, the museum handled about 70,000 texts per hour, according to Jay Mollica, the museum's creative technologist.

He attributes Send Me's success to the "personal" nature of texting, a medium used mostly to stay in touch with close friends and family.

"In the morning people will say, 'Send me coffee,'" Mollica says. "And late at night they'll say things like 'Send me friends.'"

As of July 2018, the top requested items on Send Me included the terms "love," "hearts," "cats," "dogs," "purple" and "happiness."

Quiz

- 1 Which statement would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) Texting should be a mandatory service that all college campuses provide for their students' mental health.
 - (B) Texting is a better way for people to share their feelings and fears than talking to someone they love face-to-face.
 - (C) Experts are examining the way texting can benefit their research in a variety of fields by allowing immediate feedback.
 - (D) Experts agree the ease and personal nature of texting can provide benefits for both physical and mental health.

- 2 What is the relationship between the following selections from the article?

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It would have been a "big deal" to call her doctor past 9 p.m. at night — so instead, she texted him a picture of the rash and asked whether she needed to visit the emergency room.

- (A) They support the main idea that being thoughtful about how and when you text will determine its benefits.
 - (B) They support the main idea that texting is being used by doctors to provide physical health benefits.
 - (C) They develop the main idea that texting can help people deal with traumatic events and experiences.
 - (D) They develop the main idea that experts believe there are still more drawbacks than benefits to texting.
- 3 Which answer choice BEST explains why the author wrote this article?
- (A) The author is arguing that the ease of texting is keeping many people from interacting with others.
 - (B) The author is persuading readers to participate in research that incorporates texting to help experts.
 - (C) The author is explaining experts' views on the new ways that texting is being used to positively affect people's lives.
 - (D) The author is providing evidence that more people now use texting more than traditional visits for health services.

- 4 Read the following list of people from the article.

1. *Eric Topol*
2. *Tchiki Davis*
3. *Shaye Carver*
4. *Jay Mollica*

Which two have perspectives that are MOST in AGREEMENT with each other?

- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 1 and 4
- (D) 2 and 4