Three Ways to Keep Technology From Hurting Your Relationships
by Christine Carter

In Triumphs of Experience, George Vaillant writes that "there are two pillars of happiness revealed by the seventy-five-year-old Grant Study. One is love. The other is finding a way of coping with life that does not push love away."

We all do things — perhaps daily — that push the people we love away from us. We sneak "harmless" glances at our smartphones while playing games with our children. We forget to take thirty seconds to greet our spouse warmly when we haven't seen her or him all day. We decline a call from our friend or grandmother because we don't feel like mustering the energy to truly listen. This modern world we live in is full of common situations and experiences which, if not handled well, create resistance rather than ease, impairing the strength that a relationship brings us. Tiny ruptures in our relationships drive love and connection out of our lives.

You know the feeling: You're having coffee with an old friend, and her cell phone keeps buzzing. She's left her thirteen-year-old daughter home alone, so she keeps checking her phone, just to make sure everything is okay. But then a text comes in from one of her colleagues who is working late on a problematic project. Your friend feels the need to answer her questions. In the end, you feel you had only half her attention for most of the meal. It was good to see her, but the friendship isn't what it once was.

Tiny ruptures in our relationships drive love and connection out of our lives.

Tweet Quote

Or you are having dinner with your extended family, and everyone is excited to catch up with the college kids who are home. But throughout dinner, the kids can't resist the pull of Snapchat, laughing at photos that school friends send and trying to share them before they fade. Soon, all the adults have their phones out, too, just to check what's happening ontheir Twitter feed or to post a picture of the college students on their Facebook page. No one really gets to catch up with the kids.

In these situations, and many others we've all experienced, our smartphones and laptops and tablets and all the social media they carry disrupt the very social connections they promise to create. They make us available to work 24/7, which might seem like a bonus to our relationships because now we can have our work and our family time, too — in theory.

But actually, technology can damage our relationships and our work. We don't really experience our family time, and the work we do while spending time with friends and family isn't our best. Rather than bringing us together, new technologies often create an illusion of togetherness, but without the joys, benefits, and, frankly, the challenges that real relationships bring.

Our technology addiction erodes our connection with others. Each time our phone dings, we get a nice hit of dopamine, a neurochemical that activates the reward system in our brain. It feels good, but it also makes us less willing to return to the much more demanding world of live conversation. Real-life friendship has a lot of benefits, but instant gratification is rarely one of them. Our live relationships can be exhausting compared to our online "friends." At the end of the day, it is so much less taxing to text a friend than to actually call her. It is so much less draining to update our Facebook page and reap the instant satisfaction of dozens of "likes" than to share our ideas and interests with our actual neighbors. In the short run, it seems easier to connect with others through technology, but we need to be clear that this is a false ease. In the long run, these behaviors introduce strain into our relationships.

Sherry Turkle, an MIT sociologist and author of Alone Together, writes that we avoid the vulnerability and messiness of "real" contact and intimacy while getting the sweet satisfaction of a neurochemical high from being connected digitally to more and more people. We can hide from each other, even while we are tethered together.

This hiding from others (and sometimes from our own feelings) that technology can facilitate is a pernicious poison in our relationships. Fortunately, the technology itself is not at all the problem. We need only to use it differently.

Here are 3 ways to keep your gadgets from harming your relationships:

Carve out technology-free zones and times in your life when you can pay mindful attention to what is happening in real time. Being really present with people means that when we are on the phone with them, we don't do anything else. It means initiating real, face-to-face conversations with people, even though they can bring conflict, even though they can be tiring. When we are really present, we stop interrupting ourselves and others all the time. It might be gratifying to sneak a peek at your texts, but we don't have to react to our devices all the time. We can command them instead of always letting them command us.

Practice being alone. When we don't learn how to tolerate (and even relish) solitude, we often feel lonely. "Solitude — the ability to be separate, to gather yourself—is where you find yourself so that you can reach out to other people and form real attachments," explains Turkle. "When we don't have the capacity for solitude, we turn to other people in order to feel less anxious or in order to feel alive. When this happens, we're not able to appreciate who they are. It's as though we're using them as spare parts to support our fragile sense of self."Spend time alone at home and in the car unconnected. Learn to tolerate the initial boredom that may come; it will pass. Go on a hike or to the beach without a cell phone. Deep down I think we all have a deep, dark terror of being alone and are hardwired to stay with our clan. But when we experience our ability to turn inward— which we can do only when we need the silence and stillness of solitude — we realize that we are never really alone. We feel our innate connectedness. So we need to catch ourselves when we "slip into thinking that always being connected is going to make us feel less alone," writes Turkle. "It's the opposite that's true. If we're not able to be alone, we're going to be more lonely."

Limit the time you spend in virtual worlds — including Facebook and Instagram. Virtual realities, video games, and social media are addictive. In the short term it can be far more rewarding to spend time in a fantasy world — rewarding in the way that a sugary soda is rewarding (but very unhealthy if over-consumed).Social media and other virtual realities

allow us to put on our best performances, showing the world the moment when we looked (or imagined ourselves to look) pretty or felt proud. If we're feeling lonely, we can easily "connect" with dozens of online "friends." More than that, we can avoid the problems of real people and real relationships in all their untidiness and vulnerability and pain (and all our own messiness, as well).

But the reality is (no pun intended) that our vulnerabilities create real intimacy and draw us together, and when we avoid the messiness that real-life relationships require, we end up isolated and disconnected. So be very deliberate: Use online games, social media, and virtual realities to facilitate live connections with real people, choosing real connections and real people over fake ones. Use Facebook to deepen your connection with a faraway friend by sharing articles, photos, and videos that you think she will appreciate. Play online games with your son rather than a stranger. Use match.com to make new connections, but then actually meet those connections live, in person, for coffee instead of constraining your relationships to online forums.