



## Unfriending My Ex: Confessions of a Social Media Addict

By Kim Stolz



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“In this candid and insightful new memoir, Kim Stolz discusses the trials and tribulations of our obsession with social media and mobile technology...a Tweet-worthy, share-worthy, Instagrammable look into our society and the lives we create online.” —*Harper’s Bazaar*

An incisive, hilarious, and brutally honest chronicle of our obsessions with connectivity, by a self-proclaimed social media addict.

Breaking up used to be easy. You’d sit down, air your grievances, shed some tears, then commiserate with your friends over a pint of ice cream. But then it was over. Your ex was history. And if you lived in a big enough city, chances are you’d never bump into him or her again.

But the golden age of break-ups has come and gone. Today our exes, former friends, estranged relatives, and even that random person we met that one night in Vegas are just a thumb tap away, their lives playing out in an endless soap opera of status updates, selfies, Snapchats, and Tweets. The ways we interact with each other have changed forever. But our desire for human connection remains the same.

In *Unfriending My Ex*, Kim Stolz shares her stories from the front lines of our emoji-laden, filter-heavy, ultra-connected world, capturing the hilarity and chaos of life both online and off. Whether you’ve spent two hours clicking through a semi-stranger’s vacation pictures or accidentally swiped right on a former flame, Kim Stolz is here to tell you you’re not alone, you’re not crazy, and she’d like a few of those french fries that you Instagrammed at dinner. Smart, honest, and always relatable, *Unfriending My Ex* is a must read for anyone who likes to hold a book in one hand and their phone in the other.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“Reading Kim Stolz’s riveting, haunting *Unfriending My Ex*, I found myself wondering, why did it take until 2014 – this many years into the technological revolution - for someone to write a book like this?” (Michael Cunningham, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "The Hours" and "The Snow Queen")

“The cliché holds that anyone south of 30 years old is enriched by digital devices, and happily spends their waking hours on Facebook and Twitter, expanding their network, becoming empowered as writers and thinkers, achieving fame, overthrowing corrupt governments. In this reader-friendly and cogently argued book, Kim Stolz shares another story -- of her digital addiction and how it enslaved her, fraying friendships, and attention spans, and making her and members of her generation less, not more, connected. *Unfriending My Ex* is a punch in the nose, meant not to knock out technology, but to jolt us to seek more balance in our lives. Because it is so personally honest, it will rivet your attention.” (Ken Auletta, author of *Googled*)

“Kim Stolz has written an exciting book about love and life in the era of the iPhone. Whether you're addicted to technology or totally anti-social media, she captures the reality of living a sexy, busy, buzzy life today. She's the ultimate cool chick, an authentic artist, and a natural born writer.” (Alyssa Shelasky, author of "Apron Anxiety")

“Stolz explores a topic so current and impactful that I only checked my Twitter and Instagram twice while reading it!” (Caprice Crane, international best-selling author of "Stupid and Contagious" and "Confessions of a Hater")

“I remain hopeful that despite current trends, self-awareness and genuine human connection are achievable among the ‘me’ generation. Kim Stolz’s *Unfriending My Ex* serves as an entertaining and much needed reminder that we can live without our phones (temporarily) and that being able to laugh at yourself and learn from your mistakes is crucial if you plan to thrive in this digitally connected, fast-paced society.” (Yaniv “Nev” Schulman, host of MTV’s "Catfish")

"As a self-confessed Web-aholic I am well aware that social networks have preyed upon humanity's innate need to connect, and the result is nothing short of a planetary epidemic of info-addiction. We are not only content to live in the Matrix but are increasingly driven to be a cognitive cog in its functionality. Kim Stolz has the mind of a scientist in the body of Millennial. Her experiences on reality television and MTV have made her something of a Jane Goodall of digital culture: she lives among them, ever observant, to catalog and understand their behavior patterns while attempting to determine the landscape of Mankind's future. On its present course, the signs seem to indicate 'not great.'" (Chris Hardwick, host of Comedy Central's "@midnight" and author of "The Nerdist Way")

“From reality show contestant to MTVU VJ to MTV News correspondent to blogger and tireless tweeter, Kim has been at the nexus of all the tech and cultural, um, ‘advances’ that make the 21st century so unique. I’ve always known her to have a keen sense of what makes her generation tick – the good, the bad, and the sometimes kinda ugly. Our endlessly opinionated, notoriety-seeking, web connected world. It’s hard to remember when it wasn’t this way. How did we get here – and where are we headed? Kim Stolz tackles it all in *Unfriending My Ex*.” (Ruby Rose, TV Personality, MTV VJ)

“In *Unfriending My Ex*, Kim Stolz gives us a clear-eyed, exceptionally intelligent look at a phenomenon at once mystifying and unavoidable. The thrall in which social media holds us feels so enchanting, we may be losing control of the most valuable parts of our lives to it. The author, while respectful of both progress and of her generation, seeks to restore that control. Here is the work of a grown-up young woman, hip enough to live successfully in the world as it is, yet thoughtful enough to identify its follies and delusions. If our times may be defined by a smart phone, we should be grateful that *Unfriending My Ex* is a hell of a lot smarter.” (Roger Rosenblatt, author of *Rules for Aging: A Wry and Witty Guide to Life*)

“[A] lively memoir... [Stolz] investigates and considers the various effects of society’s (and particularly her generation’s) dependency upon technology, finding that texting and smartphones allow chatting without relationship-building, loneliness in spite of keeping in touch, and increased anxiety. (*Publishers Weekly*)

#### About the Author

Kim Stolz is a former contestant on *America’s Next Top Model*, MTV News anchor, and current director of equities derivative sales at Bank of America-Merrill Lynch. She is a graduate of the Brearley School and Wesleyan University. In 2012, she was named one of the 100 most compelling People of the Year by *Out* magazine. She lives in New York City.

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Unfriending My Ex

## 2

### Generation, Interrupted

One of my best friends—we’ll call her Donna—recently sent me an e-mail. The proportions of its craziness both shocked me and felt strangely familiar. She wrote:

This morning I was waiting for the subway and managed to drop my iPhone onto the tracks. It would have been run over by a train. I panicked! Without hesitation, I jumped onto the tracks to retrieve it. Two very nice men pulled me back up. Everyone on the platform thought I was pulling an Anna Karenina. So embarrassing. I was waiting for the express, but the local came first and I boarded immediately.

Anyone who’s lived in New York City knows never to wait near the edge of the subway platform for fear of falling onto the tracks (or getting pushed by a random lunatic). My friend grew up in the city and is well aware of this rule. Nevertheless, this responsible twenty-nine-year-old, the same twenty-nine-year-old who got a near-perfect score on her SATs and went to Princeton, risked her life and voluntarily jumped onto the subway tracks, just to save her iPhone. A piece of plastic.

The rational part of me says: I can’t believe that we are so desperate to hold on to our phones that we’d put ourselves in danger. But the truth is I’m pretty sure that if this same friend dropped her iPhone onto the subway tracks tomorrow, she wouldn’t hesitate to attempt this feat again. And neither would I.

I think about the many times I wasn’t able to tear myself away from my phone to pay attention to the person right in front of me. Or all the times a person right in front of me has been too busy calling, texting, e-mailing, tweeting, and updating a status to give me the time of day. A year ago, I was working rather late on this very book. I was trying to reword an anecdote, and I asked my wife to help me. She said, “Hmm,” and looked down for a while. I assumed she was thinking about it, mulling over all of the different ways she

could help my poor anecdote. About ten minutes later, I became skeptical. This seemed like an inordinate amount of time to be thinking. I leaned over and realized that she was playing Candy Crush. Not only was she playing the game, but she was buying more lives, which meant she had played at least three rounds in the previous twenty minutes. I was alarmed and exclaimed that I thought she was helping me with my book! Her response was that she had received an e-mail, checked it, responded, and then had forgotten about helping me and decided to start up a game of Candy Crush. The fact is, I can't blame her. I spent an hour this morning trying to beat Level 287 in Candy Crush instead of finishing this chapter (btw, I'm really proud of being on Level 287). And even as I sit here now attempting to write, my father is sending me repeated FaceTime requests that come directly to my computer. He thinks it's funny to FaceTime when he is fifteen feet away from me.

About six months ago, a friend called me to ask me for job advice. She called my work line early in the morning (which is never a good plan if you want my full attention, because it means that I have my iPhone fully in front of me while I talk on the landline). She was deciding between staying in her job at a prominent advertising company or leaving and opening up her own agency (which she absolutely did not have enough experience or connections to do). At around minute seven of the conversation, I became immersed in my iPhone on a group text discussing the affair one of our friends was having with another (far more juicy than the job hunt!) and I found myself making the unavoidable and totally distracted "Oh yeah, that's amazing" and "Yeah, definitely" and "Wow . . . Wow . . ." comments that are code for "I AM NOT PAYING ATTENTION." Before I knew it, my friend had said, "You know what, you're right. Okay, I gotta go. I love you!" and gotten off the phone. I assume it was the "Yeah, definitely" default that gave her the justification to and confirmation that she should quit her job and start her own company. Which is exactly what she did. Sadly, she did not have much luck (which I could have told her would happen had I been listening!) and she closed down her agency within a year, couldn't find a job, and went to business school. Oh well.

It never feels good to know that you aren't being a good friend. The guilt always surfaces once you see how annoyed your friend is when you leave them for the night. Afterward, you think, Oh God, I shouldn't have checked my phone in the middle of that—but at the time, you see the text notification or hear the irresistible chime of a new e-mail and your hand reaches for the phone before you even realize you're doing it.

In informal surveys of my friends and colleagues, one out of every two people I talked to check their phones immediately after sex, and almost 10 percent check their phones in the middle of the act. The smartphone has become the modern post-sex cigarette, no less addictive and far more irresistible.

I speak from experience. I've been known to check my phone immediately after going to bed with someone—and there were definitely a few instances when I heard it buzz or saw the notification pop up and interrupted whatever I was doing to check it. Like most people, I wasn't even waiting for any particular message; it was just to relieve the anxiety I feel after a period of time when I haven't checked my phone. I can recall a particular time four or five years ago when I was "in the act" and suddenly saw my iPhone light up. I saw a small green box, which meant it was a text message—much more thrilling than the blue box (e-mail), beige box (Instagram), or orange box (Twitter). My ex-girlfriend happened to see it too and knew me too well. "You have to be kidding me" were the words I think I got (by the way, not words you want to hear "in the act" for any reason whatsoever). I tried to force the argument that she had already ruined the moment so I might as well just check the phone. That didn't work. She went the dramatic route and exclaimed that if I checked it, it would show how truly NOT devoted I was to our relationship (ah, women . . .). I weighed my options. And then something miraculous happened. Her phone, next to mine, also lit up. It was green. Like two cowboys (cowgirls?) walking into opposite sides of the local bar, we stared at each other. Who would make the first move? Suddenly we were on an equal playing field. "Why are you looking at me like that? I'm not going to answer it!" she said. I was back to being the loser who couldn't resist. At this point, it was clear

that the night from that angle was over. So I reached over and checked my phone. CNN Breaking News—Samsung unveils the Galaxy Smartphone on Verizon. Are you kidding me? I looked over at my girlfriend. She was texting back her ex-girlfriend who had happened to text her that she would be coming into town the next day. Man, I really lost that one.

My girlfriend eventually decided that neither of us was allowed to check our phones until fifteen minutes after getting out of bed, which was a great rule that I followed . . . for about six months. We just couldn't help ourselves. I don't know any two people who currently wait the fifteen minutes. I've asked around. From when I started writing this book three years ago through today, there has been a marked acceleration of our addiction and thus a marked decrease in our free time. Fifteen minutes? I haven't had fifteen minutes to just sit and enjoy something since 2007. It just doesn't happen. That said, I still think it's a good idea, if you can do it, because looking at a phone so intensely interrupts that afterglow and the bonding time two people should share. That is the cheesiest sentence you'll find in this book, I promise. But it's true! Far too often we surrender moments we should have together to check our phones. We simply can't stop.

Some time ago, I took my now-ex-girlfriend Gina on a four-day trip to a spa for her thirtieth birthday. I figured that an escape to a far-off and deserted place replete with professional massage therapists, bottles of wine, and so-called Japanese soaking tubs would be a welcome and necessary respite.

After boarding the plane and suffering a momentary panic attack when I thought the in-flight Wi-Fi wasn't working, I was relieved when I saw "Gogo Inflight" available in the wireless network list. I was finally ready to start relaxing, my iPad, iPhone, chargers, and USB cords in hand.

Forty minutes into a game of wireless Uno with someone named "ManOfTheMountain" from Pyongyang—how anyone managed to get an iPad or iPhone into North Korea and commence a game of wireless Uno I will never know—I felt someone tapping my shoulder. Apparently, Gina had been saying my name repeatedly for two minutes, but I had been so focused on my game, and the music coming from my Pandora app was so loud, that I hadn't heard her.

"I have an idea for this weekend," she said.

"What?" I asked, expecting her to suggest activities like couple's massages, dinner in town, or tennis—all acceptable options from my point of view.

"I think we should make this a technology-free trip. No iPhones, iPads, Gchatting, or e-mailing. Let's just hang out and reconnect and forget the outside world." Oh no . . . I felt a jolt of worry. This idea was not acceptable.

But after taking a deep breath, I had to admit that the idea was actually quite sweet, thoughtful, and definitely novel considering the world we lived in—and considering it was me she was talking to. This was her birthday trip, so I agreed to the plan. I hoped I could do it, but history and my gut told me otherwise. (I had done my cleanse a few months before but had quickly reverted to my junkie ways.) Almost immediately, a wave of unease swept over me. I looked down at my phone the way a fisherman might look at his wife (or husband) right before setting off on a three-week sail and stuttered what I knew was probably a lie: "Y-yeah. Sounds awesome, I'm down." I then proceeded to do a mental run-through of our vacation schedule, looking for potential moments—massages, manicures, getting dressed—when Gina would be busy so I could quickly "reconnect" with my technological devices.

And over the next four days, reconnect I did. I pretended to be reading a book or the New York Times on my



iPad when I was really using Gchat with friends I would be seeing in two days. I tried to wear outfits with pockets so that I could sneakily bring my phone to the bathroom to get a few texts in during dinners and lunch by the pool. It turns out that 90 degree weather is not conducive to hiding digital devices. Perhaps most embarrassingly, I connected headphones to my iPhone and covered it so I could pretend I was just listening to music, turning my back and typing any moment I could. It was pathetic.

I felt bad that I wasn't being honest with Gina, but I felt guilty so much of the time that I'd become almost immune to it. I'd given up trying to change. Part of me didn't even care—I was just obsessing about when I could use my devices again. On the last day of the trip, Gina asked me if I could please at least stop plugging earphones into my iPhone as she was aware in the perfect silence of the spa that there was no music coming out of them. She had known the whole time. She had given up on me. But this was okay—I had given up on myself years ago. I was an addict. The least I could do was accept it.

Sure, it can make me feel depressed and anxious, and I live with a near-constant state of guilt because of it, but I will always go back to it, no matter what.

I wanted to know if others felt the same way. I asked hundreds of people to describe their relationship with their smartphone. They used words like addicted, love/hate, dependent, marriage, lifeline, wife—and even tortured, chained, and captive. In fact, almost 80 percent of those who responded used these types of negative, obsessive words, compared to only 20 percent who used positive words like practical and useful. A few said that they had given up their iPhones and felt more free without them, only to buy them again later because they felt they were “missing out” on too much.

I found it heartening in a way to know I was far from the only one who got seriously stressed out when I heard the ping or buzz or triton (or the Beverly Hills, 90210 ringtone) or any other alert that a message was waiting. Most people talked about the anxiety and frustration they feel because of their ever-present need to check. One person said, “I need to get rid of the message notification immediately,” while another described it as “incredibly frustrating, to the point of madness.” There were, of course, some extremes, such as the person who said, “[Text messages and Instagram notifications] make me feel really antsy, like when I'm the last person in a store before it closes. Also it kind of makes me feel like I need to pee.” Another said, “The waiting message makes me feel fanatical. It is gut-wrenching.” Overall, out of more than two hundred people in my informal poll, more than 60 percent used words like anxiety, stress, and frustration to describe their physical and mental reactions when they know a message is waiting for them. And yet we can't even fathom giving up our phones.

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Some people use specific time frames to discuss their child's developmental stages; I use them to describe the trajectory of my smartphone addiction. When I switched from my PalmPilot to a BlackBerry, I felt like my life was finally going somewhere. When I finally switched from a BlackBerry to an iPhone, it felt like the dawn of a new era. And every time I upgrade my iPhone, I feel as though I have a new lease on life. About 90 percent of my decision to switch from a BlackBerry to an iPhone a few years ago was based on my inability to function as a healthy and focused human being when the red light on my BlackBerry was blinking. I know that I could have simply turned off the notification function that many of us refer to as the “blinking red light”—in fact, I did that three times, only to turn the light back on less than a week later because I couldn't stand not to know when messages came in, and without it I was checking my phone even more. A friend who also recently switched to the iPhone told me that getting rid of the blinking red light was also one of her main reasons for tossing her BlackBerry—because she had become like Pavlov's dog. “I would see that blinking light out of the corner of my eye and it haunted me,” she said. “I saw the light

blinking when it wasn't even blinking at all." We both thought switching to an iPhone would help. I fooled myself into thinking I would feel differently as long as there wasn't a blinking red light. I soon learned that there is a very underused function on an iPhone that alerts you with three quick flashes (like lightning!) whenever you have a new message. (For those of you who want to further complicate and accentuate your addictions, go to Settings>General>Accessibility>LED Flash for Alerts. You're welcome. I'm sorry.) It's the brightest light I've ever seen. After having it on for a few months, I began feeling as though I was experiencing the beginning of a seizure every time I got an e-mail, text, or notification. For my own health and peace of mind, I turned off the LED. Unfortunately, this did not stop me from still being tortured by the pop-up messages.

It's no wonder we start twitching when we get any sort of electronic notification, because, like Pavlov's dog, our brains have been rewired. When we experience something pleasurable, a neurotransmitter called dopamine is released in our system, giving us a euphoric feeling, which our brains will want to re-create. According to Gary Small, MD, "the same neural pathways . . . that reinforce dependence on substances can reinforce compulsive technology behaviors that are just as addictive and potentially destructive." We start to crave whatever made us feel that way, whether it's an actual drug, like nicotine, or that someone "liked" our photo on Instagram, sent us a funny or loving text, liked our event on Facebook, or tweeted at us. In a Psychology Today article, Dr. Small explains that nonaddicts also feel the dopamine effect, because it is so powerful. In fact, too many of us have become compulsive enough that some in the psychiatric community have started to wonder if Internet Compulsion Disorder—the name writer Bill Davidow has bestowed upon this national epidemic—should be included in the new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). This new addiction is a worldwide phenomenon: the tech giant Cisco surveyed members of Gen Y—that is, eighteen-to-thirty-year-olds—in eighteen countries and found that 60 percent check their phones compulsively, 90 percent before they get out of bed. I would argue this number is closer to 100 percent, as I haven't seen someone get out of bed without first checking their smartphone in at least seven years. Keane Angle, a digital strategist at 360i, a digital marketing agency in New York, believes that the desire to check our smartphones has become "a basic human need—the need for acceptance and affirmation of personal worth. When you get an e-mail, a tweet, or a 'like' on one of your status updates, it's like the crack version of a compliment—it's bite-sized, its effects last only a few seconds, and it's highly addictive."

James E. Katz, the director of emerging media studies at Boston University, explained that the fact that we don't know what news we may receive is what aggravates this compulsive need to check. And yet, he considers "the constant checking [to be] an exercise in optimism . . . Eternal hope delivered in tiny bits." I like Katz's positive spin on this addiction. I know the message could be anything—and despite my anxiety, I often think my buzzing phone will deliver great news. Unless you have a job where every text or e-mail makes you miserable, I think many people feel this sense of expectation. It's always exciting to know that something is waiting for you, that there is a flutter of possibility.

We need to satisfy this craving so much, some experts are saying, that in doing so we are acquiring a new type of attention deficit disorder—one combined with an Internet addiction—and many in the field are worried. In an interview with the New York Times, Dr. John Ratey, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard, used the term acquired attention deficit disorder to describe those whose brains are "accustomed to a constant stream of digital stimulation and feel bored in the absence of it." The digital stimulation could be from anything: television, Internet, social media, or smartphones. And Dr. Elias Aboujaoude, who helped lead a study on problematic Internet use, argues that there is a marked link between Internet addiction and attention deficit disorder. He says, "The more we become used to just sound bites and tweets, the less patient we will be with more complex, more meaningful information." In his comprehensive and entertaining book *Virtually You*, Aboujaoude describes a study that was conducted in 2008 among 752 school-age children in South Korea, where a third of the students who had been diagnosed with ADHD were

considered “addicted” to the Internet. Just as striking, Aboujaoude notes a 2004 study of college students in Taiwan found that 32 percent of Internet addicts had ADHD, whereas only 8 percent of non-Internet addicts had ADHD. While it’s outside of the realm of my authority to untangle the causal relationship between Internet addiction and ADHD, it’s true that psychologists and students of the DSM would argue that Internet addiction cannot cause ADHD and that an “acquired” attention deficit disorder is not a real possibility. I’m inclined to agree with them though I do think that ADHD-like traits seem to be increasingly present in Internet and smartphone addicts. I certainly experience them.

Experts’ concerns have only grown in recent years, particularly with the advent of smartphones—so much so that Larry D. Rosen, PhD, an international expert in what he calls the “psychology of technology,” believes we are all headed for what he calls an iDisorder. In an article for Lifehack.org about his book *iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us*, he writes that we will all “exhibit signs and symptoms of a psychiatric disorder such as OCD, narcissism, addiction or even ADHD, which are manifested through [our] use—or overuse—of technology.” Harvard’s Roney explains that our brains are consistently “hijacked” by all this media—and that when we absentmindedly reach for our phones or can’t resist the urge to grab our devices, we are like drug addicts. “Drug addicts don’t think; they just start moving. Like moving for your BlackBerry” or your iPhone.

My friend Dr. Amy Wicker told me about a simple self-test that has proven accurate in identifying problems with alcohol known as the CAGE questionnaire, utilized by health care professionals to see if a patient may be addicted to alcohol. CAGE stands for cut, annoy, guilty, and eye-opener, each of which is represented in the questionnaire. Dr. Wicker told me that if you answer yes to at least two of these questions, the possibility of alcoholism should be investigated further. I began to wonder if the CAGE questionnaire could be used to determine usage patterns that reflect problems with excessive smartphone use with similar levels of accuracy.

Have you ever felt you should Cut down on your usage?

To help you, here are some telltale signs from my own life:

- Your friends constantly make sarcastic comments about your smartphone or Facebook use and say things like “Look at Kim on her iPhone again! She’s so much fun to have dinner with!” I’ve gotten this one hundreds of times.
- You’ve made life-changing decisions because of your addiction (e.g., you failed to go to class because you were immersed in heavy stalking of your ex, or perhaps you called in sick to work because you drunk-texted a coworker the night before and simply could not stand to be seen).

Have you ever been Annoyed by your friends’ criticism of your addiction?

Again, use my own experiences as a guide:

- Your friends tell you in advance that they will only go to dinner with you if you keep your smartphone in your bag and away from the table. In response, you get defensive and threaten to call the dinner off.
- Your friends grab your phone out of your hand while you are texting in an effort to express their annoyance and, in turn, you grab theirs out of their bag and throw them on the floor.

Have you ever felt Guilty or bad about your usage?

These are particularly embarrassing for me:

- You have started faking bathroom trips during dinners to get your fix without people knowing about it because you feel guilty.
- You find yourself lying about your usage to almost everyone you know.
- You write an entire book about it (ugh).

Do you ever need to check your smartphone first thing in the morning (an Eye-opener) in order to start your day and steady your nerves?

Things to admit to yourself:

- You cannot go more than ten minutes (one minute) after you wake up without checking your smartphone/social media.
- Not seeing your phone on your bedside in the morning sends you into a state of complete anxiety. You jump out of bed, find your laptop, and use the Find My iPhone app to create loud pings to see if you can find it. If that doesn't work, you begin blaming others. Someone must have stolen it! Later, you find it in the bathroom.

When I used the CAGE questions as a guide to talk to people in my generation about their smartphone and Internet use, I estimated that 96 percent of us were addicted. The language we used to talk about our digital lives was strikingly similar to the words used by other friends and people I've spoken to who have gone through actual substance abuse. Our lives are full of shame and secrecy. One person admitted, "I try to hide from my boyfriend the fact that when I wake up each morning, I roll over and check my Facebook and Instagram, and pretend that I am really just on my side taking a vitamin and drinking water." Also, do people really keep vitamins by their bedside? All I have are my phone/iPad/computer and their respective chargers.

William Powers, author of *Hamlet's BlackBerry*, describes our addiction as akin to being on a "hamster wheel" of always needing another hit of dopamine. He said to me, "There is something satisfying that we all feel deep inside when we hear the sound of a new e-mail coming in or see that . . . light on our phones. But really, how satisfying is it? How much is that micro-feeling adding to your life versus what you are giving up by dividing your attention?"

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Media, television networks, and even some schools are finding that their only choice is to play into our acquired attention deficit disordered brains and create shorter programming, send out constant reminders about school-related events on websites and Twitter pages, and write countless blog posts in order to reach this new type of increasingly addled mind.

The media has been equally affected. I remember writing two-hundred-fifty-word articles for the MTV News website and being asked to cut them down to just one hundred or one hundred twenty-five words because our audience would get bored and click away. (Thank God; it became outrageously tiring to find two hundred fifty words to say about Miley—this of course was before her 2013 VMA "performance.") In one year, the suggested word count went down to seventy-five or even fifty—barely enough words to convey anything remotely journalistic beyond a bulleted list of comments and a joke or two.

The constant distractions and all our time online are clearly affecting our brains and may even be leading to new challenges in learning. Matt Richtel's 2010 New York Times article "Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction" featured a group of bright kids who were failing many of their classes because they did not have the attention span to finish the assignments, and in some cases even forgot to do homework. They were consistently plugged in—surfing the Web, texting, playing video games—and younger brains, which are still developing, get used to this behavior. Richtel wrote, "'Their brains are rewarded not for staying on task but for jumping to the next thing,' said Michael Rich, an associate professor at Harvard Medical School and executive director of the Center on Media and Child Health in Boston." Dr. Rich and other experts are worried that staring at screens will rewire kids' brains, with harmful and lasting effects. Teachers are concerned that their students can't concentrate at all and that they are leaving high school with less-than-ideal reading, writing, and discussion skills. Some teachers are resorting to reading books aloud in class because students can't focus long enough to read twenty pages of a chapter at night.

These detrimental effects are more obvious in developing brains but can be seen in adult brains as well. Nonstop distraction hinders productivity. According to a 2011 study by Cisco, 24 percent of college students and young professionals "experience three to five interruptions in a given hour, while 84 percent get interrupted at least once while trying to complete a project." Further, a recent study of university students found that those who multitasked heavily in a variety of media—texting, instant messaging, Facebooking, and tweeting while at work or a social gathering—were less likely to process information in a meaningful way. They had slower response times, were more easily distracted by irrelevant information, were unable to switch tasks easily, and retained useless information in their short-term memory. In other words, they may not have been born with ADD, but it certainly seems as though they acquired it.

Perhaps we were never meant to multitask. After all, according to the aforementioned study of university students, "processing multiple incoming streams of information is considered a challenge for human cognition." Further, psychiatrist and author Edward M. Hallowell describes multitasking as a "mythical activity in which people believe they can perform two or more tasks simultaneously as effectively as one." It's why your mom told you to turn off the TV while doing your homework, why some companies are now preventing their employees from using some social media sites, and why people have died while texting and driving. As Dr. Richard Cytoiwic explains on his Fallible Mind blog, "The same inefficiency that freezes up your computer bogs down a brain when it is forced to divide attention among multiple tasks . . . In a world of nonstop distraction, you may be able to juggle things for a while, but you can't keep it up; it simply takes more energy and bandwidth than we have."

Never giving our brains a break is dangerous; according to the New York Times article by Matt Richtel, scientists in California found that rats were only able to develop permanent or long-lasting memories after experiencing something new if they rested. No one likes to be compared to a rodent, but we all need to power down in order to process our experiences in a valuable way, to retain what we have learned and establish the memory. Other research shows that taking a quick rest will actually enhance our memory. As reported in *Psychological Science*, two groups of individuals listened to a story, after which one group played a video game and another shut their eyes for about ten minutes. The study found that "memory can be boosted by taking a brief 'wakeful rest' after learning something verbally new and that memory lasts not just immediately but over a longer term." Apparently, whatever we do in the short time after we learn something new will determine the quality of our memory. We don't necessarily need to take a nap—we just need to take a break from all the noise. We need more Thoreau-inspired experiences. We need to find our own Waldens. A University of Michigan study revealed that walking in nature helped people learn more effectively than walking through a busy urban environment, which may mean that our brains get fatigued from an onslaught of information. I can tell which chapters of this book I wrote at my apartment in New York City versus the ones I wrote out in the country at my parents' house. I notice that I have a harder time

finding my voice in the chapters written in the oversaturated and bustling city. You'll probably notice too. Being in the silence of the country allows me to relax just enough so that I actually absorb what I am writing and how it sounds. This type of downtime is essential for our brains to work better, but in a constant state of stimulation, we're not allowing ourselves to have it.

In addition to making us less responsive to people we love and perhaps a bit dumber, our addiction also makes us do some pretty crazy things. Thirty percent of people I talked to seemed alarmed when reading a sentence in which the word BlackBerry referred to a fruit, almost half the people know how to drive with their knees so that they can text and drive, and just over 20 percent admitted to only buying fingerless gloves because it's too hard to text while wearing regular gloves or mittens. One Christmas, I actually cut the fingers off a beautiful pair of cashmere gloves my mother bought me so that I could freely type on my phone during my wintertime commute. I am still disturbed by this, though apparently I'm not disturbed enough to have refrained from specifically asking my parents for fingerless gloves the following Christmas.

I am admittedly one of those people who tend to lose things easily and frequently. This year, I made the decision to attach an adhesive pocket to the back of my iPhone to serve as a wallet. I may lose my wallet five times in a year, but it's almost impossible to lose something that I'm checking every two to three minutes, so I finally arrived at the brilliant idea that if I actually turn my iPhone into a wallet, I won't lose anything. My iPhone has functioned as my wallet for over a year now and I have yet to cancel any cards or take that arduous trip to the DMV to replace my license.

A few years ago, I sat on a panel at South by Southwest about teenage cell phone use in America. When one of the speakers mentioned that he missed the good ol' days when people used to put down their phones during dinner and pay attention to their friends instead of texting or scrolling through Facebook, the room lit up with excited nods and chants of "Yes!" The audience included smartphone addicts like me, bloggers, and digital media professionals—basically all the kinds of people who annoy you at dinner because they can't put down their devices. Yet all of us were agreeing enthusiastically that we hated how much our dinner companions and friends constantly ignored us. I wondered if some of the people nodding in staunch agreement were sort of guiltily admitting that they are often the ones who are too busy tweeting, Instagramming, e-mailing, Tumblring, Facebooking, BBMing, or Snapchatting to give their friends and family the attention they deserve—I know I was.

We hate ourselves for using these things so much, but we learn to live with the guilt—we are relieved instead of aggravated or insulted when others take out their phones at dinner, because it means we can too. It's like when you want to cancel plans with someone but are dreading that awkward e-mail and then they send you a text canceling before you have the chance to! The best. That is how I feel when I see a friend take out her phone at dinner. What a relief. I can now reach for mine. We can remember when we were focused and attentive, and it bothers us, but that doesn't mean we will stop.

While on the panel, I began to notice how the reactions differed throughout the audience. The group consisted mainly of people in my age group, between twenty-five and thirty-five, but there were also several teenagers, as well as a few people who were at least forty or fifty. When the complaints about tech and smartphone addiction were raised, those in their midtwenties and early thirties were by far the most passionate—responding as if we were all inmates of the same prison, aware of our lives beforehand, and dumbfounded by how we had let ourselves become captive to these devices that now run our lives. In contrast, the younger members of the audience seemed less annoyed and at times almost nonchalant and generally unaffected. I guess it makes sense if you consider that these digital natives haven't known life any other way. But what really surprised me was that the older people in the room, those who had spent much more time in their lives without such technology, were just as affected by its hypnotizing pull.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Of all the people I talked into joining Foursquare (my parents, seven friends, and two coworkers), my dad was the one who became the most addicted. Foursquare is the location-based social media game that crowns a person "mayor" of any location once they have visited and "checked in" at a place more than anyone else. It works with your phone's GPS functionality, so you need to actually be at or very near the place at which you are requesting to "check in." When someone checks in more than you, Foursquare sends you an e-mail saying that you've been "ousted" as the mayor. The other day I was ousted from my mayorship of the Amanpulo resort in the Philippines. It destroys me that I will likely never get it back and there is nothing I can do about it.

My father is a retired Wall Street sales trader with a serious competitive streak. He and my mother are happily married and live in Bridgehampton. They have the kind of connected relationship and home life I aspire to emulate. Nonetheless, thanks to Foursquare, he became wildly obsessed with becoming mayor of as many places in the Hamptons as possible. Most days he would wake up around six A.M. to play a round of golf, then drive through town, checking into Bobby Van's, Candy Kitchen, Starbucks, Hampton Coffee Company (yes, that's two coffee places), Pierre's, and the bank, in addition to any other place he actually needed to be. He even became mayor of long-term parking at JFK International Airport for two months. He felt particularly proud of this mayorship. I think my favorite aspect of my father's Foursquare addiction, however, was immediately after he realized that one of the perks of being the mayor of certain locations, like Starbucks, was that you got special deals. At Bridgehampton Starbucks, my dad learned, his mayorship granted him one free coffee per day. He would strut into Starbucks, order coffee at the counter, and when the cashier asked him to pay, he would whip out his phone, say something weird like "not so fast," and flash his Foursquare deal for them, winning his free coffee. It was out of a *Seinfeld* or *Curb Your Enthusiasm* episode. He had gamed the system. He had won.

My mom and I weren't concerned about this new obsession; we were more amused—this was so in line with my dad's personality and we enjoyed teasing him about it. When I visited my parents shortly after introducing my father to the game, he took over our dinner conversation, venting his frustration that someone named "Ian Z." was still mayor of Bobby Van's. My dad just couldn't seem to steal the mayoral title, even though he checked in at least three times a day. The day he finally became mayor was great: We had steak to celebrate, and Ian Z. sent my dad a friend request on Foursquare—maybe out of respect or maybe out of pure curiosity. Ian Z. must have felt the same way that Andre Agassi felt when Pete Sampras beat him: completely floored and humble and exhilarated. I thought that with this victory, my father's tenth virtual mayoral title, his obsession would die down. I was wrong.

The next week, my father went to work out at the gym, where he was the mayor and was always greeted with open arms by its staff, who couldn't seem to understand why a man who went to the gym only four times a week was mayor while they, who went every day, were not. Clearly they had no idea about his late-night and early-morning drive-bys. In any case, thirty minutes into the session, my dad's trainer said, "Ray, I gotta ask you a question."

My father, unsuspecting, said, "What's up?"

"Well, the other day, I was heading into Citarella in Bridgehampton and I saw you drive into the parking lot, stop for about forty-five seconds, then pull out again and drive away. You weren't checking in on Foursquare, were you? Because you know that's cheating."

My dad swore to quit Foursquare on the spot—well, as soon as he had stolen the last mayoral title (for Bridgehampton Cemetery—who wants to be mayor of dead people?) from his archnemesis, Ian Z. On, November 2, 2010, my father became the mayor of the cemetery, and he quit Foursquare the next day. Even

though I was happy he had the strength to quit, I was also helplessly and absurdly proud that my own dad had become the virtual mayor of all the restaurants and most of the bars I went to in the Hamptons.

Foursquare and its virtual victory quest took over many of my loved ones' lives for a period, not just my dad's. A few of my friends would go out at night even when they didn't want to, just so they could check into places and reinstate their mayorships, or would travel miles out of the way just to get new Foursquare "badges." If we were a few visits away from becoming mayor, we would aim to go to a specific part of town just to check into whatever bar, hotel, or restaurant we wanted to be mayor of. Sometimes it was for bragging rights; other times there were incentives, like prizes that were blatant marketing ploys. We were addicted to the faux connection, to the distraction.

Just like Friendster and Myspace before it, many think Foursquare is quickly becoming irrelevant. Now that people can link their Instagram and Foursquare accounts and tag locations on their photographs, there is little reason to sign directly into the Foursquare application. Like many of its predecessors and many that will follow, Foursquare was meaningless, pointless, and completely addictive while it lasted. But like many of its peers, it has died down and may become obsolete, paving the way for the newer, shinier social media like Instagram, Tinder, and Snapchat. One day, those will be rendered obsolete as well when we find something else we love more tomorrow, chasing it down onto the subway tracks.

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