

The Cell Phone: A Modern Day "Pacifier"

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A two-year-old child cries uncontrollably in a fit of emotion. You are beside yourself as a parent on what to do to calm him down. Eye contact, soft words and even a warm hug do not seem to work. As a last resort you pull out the infamous "binky" and insert it into his mouth. Almost instantly, the child is "pacified" as his emotions seem to quell. The "pacifier" has done its trick once again to calm the anxious child. This simple latex device is all it took to change his mood.

The pacifier has been around for many years. It is a tried and true method of calming the emotions of a child and making him feel safe and at ease. In the last few years a shift has occurred where not just infants are using pacifiers, but so are teenagers and adults. These new modern day "binkies" are called "Cell Phones." A cell phone has become today's version of the pacifier as our culture has become addicted to its usage.

The cell phone is not the first symbolic pacifier to make its way into our lives. Smoking for many people has the same result. The holding of the cigarette, the inhaling of the smoke and the ritual of lighting up regularly will pacify one's mood. A smoker's pipe might have the same action of pacifying an individual, whether or not the pipe is even lit. Just sucking on the end of a cold pipe is enough to satisfy this primal instinct of pacifying one's emotions. A family pet dog who travels everywhere with you can also be the great pacifier that gives one the sense of feeling at ease and safe.

Everywhere you look these days teenagers and adults are clutching on to cell phones, talking on cell phones or using a cell phone to send and receive text messages. Whether it is at a party, concert, public event, while driving, while walking across the street or eating dinner at a restaurant, the vast majority of the over eight-year-old population is most likely carrying their pacifier with them nearly always. What you don't see are the teenagers and adults sleeping with their electronic soothing devices as a child in the past would sleep with a "Teddy Bear" or a favorite doll. A constantly available transmission signal twenty-four-hours a day allows people to feel as if they are safe and always have a life line to someone else. Many feel safe and at ease by being "plugged in" and "turned on" to one's network, as if they were still sucking on a latex pacifier.

Receiving a text message feels good. You do not feel entirely alone. Someone "out there" is thinking of you. You are pacified when you are about to go on stage and you receive a text message from a loved one wishing you "good luck." This feels like a giant "warm fuzzy" hug of encouragement. Receiving a text message from someone before going to bed helps to reassure you that the world is a safe place. You are now pacified. All is well. You can go to sleep now—until the cell phone buzzes again and again from other members of your network who need their own reassurances or "pacification" that their world is also safe. If a person could accurately describe his emotions he might say "I'm scared," "I feel lonely" or "I wish someone would hold me." A cell phone addict will not use these exact words. Most likely, cool talk, gossip and a few giggles are enough for the pacification process to take hold.

The emotional attachment to the cell phone is enormous. Do you feel lost and naked if you leave the house and forget your phone? What do you imagine might happen if you were in trouble and needed to call someone? Would you have the courage to ask a stranger to borrow their phone or venture into a store to ask for a "telephone favor?" This widespread panic is the same as if a small child were to lose his pacifier at the mall. Terror sets in for the small child who loses his binky as well as for a teenager or adult who finds himself without his "communicator."

The downside to this trend is enormous. The drastic rise in accidents and death from texting and cell phone calls while driving is just the starting point. People are becoming more distracted and less present than ever before. (A few years back a horrible train accident in Chatsworth, California that killed several passengers was blamed on the train's engineer—who was busy text messaging when he should have been paying attention to the red lights that he passed right through.) Cell phones have crept into churches, libraries and even yoga studios. These once sacred and silent grounds are now being overrun by the cell phone addict looking for his next "hit" that comes in the form of a call or text message.

This electronic gadget is heralded as such a remarkable transformation in our culture that few inventions can compare. Many claim that cell phones have made our world much more connected and far safer. I would certainly disagree. Both of these claims are untrue and the reality is that cell phones have made our societies more disconnected and less safe.

Here are some examples:

When everyone is expected to carry their cell phones with them the social business structure reacts. One reaction is that it is almost impossible to find a pay phone land line anywhere you might end up. Hotels, gas stations, fast food restaurants, movie theaters, public squares, libraries, and many more places that used to host a public pay phone have almost entirely removed theirs. In addition, many highways across the country have removed their safety net of emergency roadside telephones as drivers are expected to carry a cell phone with them at all times. If your cell phone fails or if you go out of the house without one, there is not longer a public telephone network to provide a safety net. You are on your own.

Most people are very dependent on the cell phone industry to constantly provide a signal and the nationwide electrical generating system to constantly produce electricity to keep it all working. We have seen on many occasions, either due to natural disasters or electric grid failures, that we are vulnerable and our cell phone safety net is not that reliable after all. The world is a much less safe place because of cell phones.

The way people behave towards each other has also radically changed. As our electronic pacifiers have taken over, our neighborly relationships have changed. Neighbors or passing motorists are less likely to stop and help you if you have a roadside emergency. You are expected to use your cell phone to call the "professionals" to come out and rescue you and not rely on your fellow citizens and neighbors. We are living in an age where many people would rather talk to a stranger at the other end of their "Onstar" connection than a real person who might judge them.

The cell phone is also heralded as a way to bring more communication to our world. This is also a myth. With more and more high-tech communication devices in our hands than ever before, we are communicating with each other far less. With text

messages one is able to control and edit a conversation. Short bursts of non-emotional and well-planned out verbiage are the norm. The generation of "text communicators" will quickly find out when they go to have a personal relationship or interview for a job that there is a real world outside of their gigabytes of software.

The every day cell phone is not much more than a "pacifier." Just as the latex "binky" is placed in the mouth of a frightened and insecure child, the cell phone is placed in one's ear or a text or "tweet" is exchanged so that you never have to be alone with your own feelings. It is estimated that most of those text messages and "tweets" are nothing more than gossip and drama anyways. According to Sherry Turkle, author of *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, a teenage boy sends and receives on average 3000 text messages per month. A girl of the same age will send and receive nearly 4000 text messages.

Cell phone users have a collection of "friends" listed in their digital phone books just like an alcoholic might have a collection of spirits hidden away behind the liquor cabinet. Each contact might have made an unspoken commitment to always be available in order to fulfill the need for a security blanket and to be each other's *drug of choice*. It does not matter what level of communication might exist between the users, what does matter is that someone is there at the other end to make you feel safe. Where are all of the 12-step support groups for cell phone addicts now that cell phones have emerged as the latest addiction fad?

Parents use these electronic pacifiers to quell their own fears about sending their kids off to school and other play dates without one. I have often wondered why would a parent knowingly give a nine or ten-year-old a cell phone (and pay the monthly fees on it as well)? The answer is simple. A child can stay "tethered" to an adult with a cell phone because the unwritten and unspoken rule states that a child is expected to respond to an adult's text messages or phone calls *at all times*. This strategy initially helps to relieve the anxiety of the parent but most often backfires.

When the text message or phone call is not answered "right away" from the child, the parent's panic button remains on high alert until the phone call or text is responded to. The cell phone will "pacify" the adult when he hears what he wants to hear from the child (he is safe) and will "stress out" a parent when he does not receive a response right away. Hourly text messages and phone calls are frequent in the cell phone addicted world. Making sure your children or "friends" are still "out there" is like the pacifier going back in your mouth to suspend all suspicion that you have not been abandoned. In the long term, cell phones create more emotional instability because users begin to worry when their message is not answered right away.

The emotional toll a cell phone culture is taking on us is enormous. You are seldom "off" and nearly always "plugged in." You are kept at attention and unable to relax as you await a call or text from one of your cyber friends. Real relationships have been downgraded to electronic contacts. Your panic meter shoots off the charts when you do not immediately receive a text message or telephone call from someone who you expect to respond back right away. You are kept hostage by your barrage of text messaging and cell phone use. If you do not respond right away to someone else's message you fear being abandoned as the caller or "texter" on the other end might have already moved on to someone else who is willing to play the gossip game with him.

The irony is that most people are using technology to solve a problem that technology has created. As the cell phone culture has continued to expand, many find it difficult to turn off their technology and relax. This hyper-stressed state leads one to use technology even more as an addictive process to numb oneself out from the stress of so much technology.

Could it be that the cell phone is an attempt to bring us back to our mammalian roots that have been stripped away from us? Most mammals will operate as a pack and sleep together to instill a sense of safety and relaxation (someone is always watching your back). As science merged with patriarchy the family bed concept was frowned upon as we have become removed from the comfort and safety of our pack. We were banished to our own bed rooms and individual beds in infancy because rational scientists decided to break natural law and train us to disregard our emotional world. Most people remain frozen in a state of fear because they did not have the early primal training to remind them that the world was a safe and friendly place. Could it be that the cell phone, in its pacification process, is an attempt to connect back to our tribe in order to re-instill the lost sense of safety? While not physically present, just knowing that you have a "pack" at the touch of your fingertips brings comfort.

This article is not so much a commentary on the cell phone but an expose on the culture that we have become. If it were not for the cell phone we would find something else to keep us medicated and numb. The cell phone just happens to be small and convenient to be able to take with you wherever you might go. Just as a pacifier is easy to carry with you, so is a cell phone.

When you make your "village" your Facebook friends or your Twitter fans you might come to the realization that when a real crisis occurs, these are not necessarily the people who will be there for you. Those people who you have face to face "real" relationships with will be the ones who are by your side when it counts. Cell phone buddies do not want relationships where a commitment is too high. The common cell phone user desires a handful of people who are willing to be available to respond immediately but who aren't willing to get too close emotionally.

Cell phones are not "good" or "bad." Most people, young and old, do not have the emotional maturity to know how to use them for their greatest benefit. Cell phones do not create cell phone addiction; addicted people just find something else (like a cell phone) to use to stay medicated. Cell phones have become our latex binkies to calm our emotions. We are allowing technology to do more and personal relationships to do less. Is your cell phone being applied for a useful purpose or is it just a pacifier to calm your insecurities?

Resources

Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*

Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*