

There's No Substitute for Meeting in Person. Here's Why.

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Research shows that face-to-face interactions may feel like a lot more work than using technology. But in reality, they're more energizing.



People who rely on social media to combat loneliness are likely to experience a stronger wish for company down the road.

ILLUSTRATION: FEDERICO GASTALDI

Chris is a hard guy to pin down. Our friendship was forged in college, when time was abundant and close friends lived next door. These days, balancing work and family means that finding time to hang out is a never-ending challenge.

One recent evening, though, we made it work and went out to eat. After the best farm-to-table fare that Kansas has to offer, when we were making our goodbyes, he said, “I almost canceled on you tonight.”

I joked that it was understandable; I was poor company. He laughed, adding, “Oh, nothing like that, I just didn’t feel like I had the energy. But it recharged my batteries.”

These days, many of us are reluctant or ambivalent about making social plans. We feel we lack the energy or bandwidth, so we end up avoiding social interactions—even with good friends. It seems a lot easier to catch up through mobile and social media.

But here’s what research advises: Don’t take that shortcut. Despite its ease, technology is no substitute for meeting in person. Yes, a vibrant in-person social life takes a lot of mental energy. The more energy you spend, though, the more you get back. Like going to the gym, the more you do it, the better you feel.

Social snacks

Communication is a lot like food. People need to eat, but not all food is equally nutritious. What people talk about, and the medium they use to talk to each other, influences how many social “calories” we take in.

Texting and social media are popular, in part, because they ask so little of us. It is easy to try to fill our need for social connection by commenting on someone’s vacation pictures or wishing them a happy birthday.

But talking via technology is like a social snack—temporarily redirecting the feeling of disconnection but failing to satisfy the need. The desire for nourishing social calories soon returns.

Getting those calories often feels like too much work. In a real-world conversation, we must be aware of what we are saying and the messages we are giving off while following the conversation and attending to our partner. It is complex and tiring. And it gets harder when the conversation is emotionally laden, difficult or intense.

Taking the convenient path, though, is a losing proposition. Research shows that people who rely on social media to combat loneliness experience a stronger wish for company down the road both over weeks and over years. Partly because of what it demands, meaningful, in-person conversation restores our sense of connection to one another.

The best benefits

Natalie Pennington, Andy Merolla and I recently looked at this subject in studies where we compared face-to-face conversation with phone calls, video chats, texts or direct messages, email and social media in their ability to satisfy social needs.

In one study, over the course of a week, we surveyed more than 100 people five times a day, asking them how lonely or connected they felt. This allowed us to see how much participants' feelings changed after they had an online or in-person interaction later in that same day. Although all social interactions reduced loneliness and built connections compared with being alone, face-to-face interactions and phone calls were the best.

Those are just regular times, though. What about during particularly lonely times of life—when people are socially starved? Wouldn't digital communications make a big difference then?

In another test, we randomly assigned over 300 people to think of one specific time when they felt either particularly disconnected or particularly connected. Then, we asked how much they relied on different forms of communication to talk to their close friends and family. Whether that period of life was socially rich or socially malnourished, face-to-face communication boosted connection and mitigated loneliness the most.

A time for snacking

At the same time, it is important not to discount what technology can do. Our research found that any back-and-forth interaction was better than none. Although mediated communication doesn't do much for people who are socially connected—they have plenty of opportunities for conversation—for those who need someone to talk to, anything helps. When we have moved cross-country or are going through a breakup, it matters when a loved one reaches out through text, social media or email.

It is crucial to remember, though, that despite its costs of time, planning and attention, routine in-person conversations with close friends and family are part of an energy-renewing social system. Considering the benefits of regular social contact for longevity and health, a routine social life gives back more than it costs.

Getting our social needs met through conversation gives us energy rather than takes it away. We probably will feel a bit tired after we socialize, but in the long run, our social appetite is filled much more.

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