

Face the Facts: We are All Headed for an "iDisorder"

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by Larry Rosen, Ph.D. in Rewired: The Psychology of Technology

It should come as no surprise that we are all hopelessly addicted to our devices, particularly our smartphones. Why shouldn't we be? We are now able to carry a powerful computer around 24/7 in our pocket or purse. The new "WWW" really means "Whatever, Wherever, Whenever." And we are all succumbing to its draw. Just look at any restaurant table and you will see phones sitting next to forks and knives. It is normal to see someone pick up a smartphone, tap tap tap and put it back down while in the middle of talking. Is this healthy or are we all headed down a slippery slope toward what I call an "iDisorder."

An iDisorder is where you exhibit signs and symptoms of a psychiatric disorder such as OCD, narcissism, addiction or even ADHD, which are manifested through your use—or overuse—of technology. Whether our use of technology makes us exhibit these signs or simply exacerbates our natural tendencies is an open question, but the fact is we are all acting as though we are potentially diagnosable.

Several recent studies from my lab highlight some of these issues. In one anonymous online survey of more than 1,000 Americans we found that more than half of teenagers and young adults of the iGeneration (born in the 1990s) and the Net Generation (born in the 1980s) told us that they became anxious if they couldn't check their text messages all day long. And text they do! According to the Nielsen Company the "typical" teen sends and receives 3,417 text messages per month. Teen girls top that with nearly 4,000 per month! If the teens sleep 8 hours a night (which is an hour less than recommended) that's between 7 and 8 text messages per waking hour.

The study also showed us that the majority of teens and young adults check their texts and Facebook several times a day. And most of that is on their mobile device, on the go. How about sleep? In one study of 300 high school students, the average teen slept only 6 hours per school night. They tried to make up for it by sleeping more than 10 hours each weekend night but it still all averaged out to only 7 hours per night leaving a weekly 14-hour sleep debt. Eight in 10 of those students told us that they rarely or never get a good night's sleep during the week. They must be studying so hard that they don't have time for sleep.

Well, yes and no.

They are studying but the number one activity in the last hour before sleep is surfing the Internet followed by studying, texting and social networking. Are they simply glued to their laptops? Nope! It is their smartphone that is the cause of much of their sleep debt. Not only is it used instead of a computer, but most teens sleep with it on vibrate or tone and one in four are awakened at night by a text or email that they respond to before attempting to fall back asleep. And most of those activities are done either at the same time or by rapidly switching back and forth. We all multitask - well we are really task switching - and the younger generations do it more but we are all succumbing to the allure of clicking and switching.

It's not just the younger generations who are inundated by technology. One in three Gen Xers and one in six Baby Boomers check their devices all the time. They may not be texting as much but they are constantly checking in with websites, email and other cyberactivities.

Our most surprising study examined a thousand teens and adults to see whether technology use might be related to signs and symptoms of psychiatric disorders. The short answer is YES. For each generation, regardless of ethnic background, socioeconomic status, or [gender](#), the more certain technologies are used the more likely it is that the person will exhibit these signs. Different technologies appear to be predictive of different signs. One of the major culprits is social networking, which is a predictor of many disorders.

Do we need to take a permanent holiday from our technology or is there an iCure for an iDisorder? The outlook is very positive if we recognize the signs and learn to take small steps to keep our brains healthy and sane. Here are sample strategies. More can be found in my new book, *iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession With Technology and Overcoming its Hold on Us*.

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- At the dinner table declare a "tech break" at the beginning of the meal and have everyone check their phones for a minute and then silence them and place them upside down on the table. Now talk for 15 minutes followed by someone declaring another "tech break." The upside down silent phone is a stimulus that says, "Don't worry - you can check me soon." This stops the brain from obsessing about every little e-communication.
- Using technology evokes excessive mental activity so much so that our brains are all abuzz all day long. Your brain needs periodic resetting. This doesn't take a lot of time. Fifteen minutes of walking through nature (or even looking at a nature picture book), doing puzzles, or talking to someone about something fun and positive are just a few ways to reset your brain. Consider doing one of these activities every few hours to calm the brain and stop the potential iDisorder.

There is no turning back. We live in a connected world and we are better because of it. We know more than ever before and we are more social than ever before. But we have to learn to take care of our brains to avoid an iDisorder. Don't blame Steve Jobs for your compulsions. Take control and do something good for your brain. You will be a better person for it and have better relationships with those around you.

The Trouble With Bright Kids

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by Heidi Grant Halvorson in HBR blog network

It's not easy to live up to your fullest potential. There are so many obstacles that can get in the way: bosses that don't appreciate what you have to offer, tedious projects that take up too much of your time, economies where job opportunities are scarce, the difficulty of juggling career, family, and personal goals.

But smart, talented people rarely realize that one of the toughest hurdles they'll have to overcome lies within.

People with above-average aptitudes — the ones we recognize as being especially clever, creative, insightful, or otherwise accomplished — often judge their abilities not only more harshly, but fundamentally differently, than others do (particularly in Western cultures). Gifted children grow up to be more vulnerable, and less confident, even when they should be the most confident people in the room. Understanding why this happens is the first step to righting a tragic wrong. And to do that, we need to take a step back in time.

Chances are good that if you are a successful professional today, you were a pretty bright fifth-grader. You did well in several subjects (maybe every subject), and were frequently praised by your teachers and parents when you excelled.

When I was a graduate student at Columbia, my mentor Carol Dweck and another student, Claudia Mueller, conducted a study looking at the effects of different kinds of praise on fifth-graders. Every student got a relatively easy first set of problems to solve and were praised for their performance. Half of them were given praise that emphasized their high ability ("You did really well. You must be really smart!"). The other half were praised instead for their strong effort ("You did really well. You must have worked really hard!").

Next, each student was given a very difficult set of problems — so difficult, in fact, that few students got even one answer correct. All were told that this time they had "done a lot worse." Finally, each student was given a third set of easy problems — as easy as the first set had been — in order to see how having a failure experience would affect their performance.

Dweck and Mueller found that children who were praised for their "smartness" did roughly 25% worse on the final set of problems compared to the first. They were more likely to blame their poor performance on the difficult problems to a lack of ability, and consequently they enjoyed working on the problems less and gave up on them sooner.

Children praised for the effort, on the other hand, performed roughly 25% better on the final set of problems compared to the first. They blamed their difficulty on not having tried hard enough, persisted longer on the final set of problems, and enjoyed the experience more.

It's important to remember that in Dweck and Mueller's study, there were no mean differences in ability between the kids in the "smart" praise and "effort" praise groups, nor in past history of success — everyone did well on the first set, and everyone had difficulty on the second set. The only difference was how the two groups interpreted difficulty — what it meant to them when the problems were hard to solve. "Smart" praise kids were much quicker to doubt their ability, to lose confidence, and to become less effective performers as a result.

The kind of feedback we get from parents and teachers as young children has a major impact on the implicit beliefs we develop about our abilities — including whether we see them as innate and unchangeable, or as capable of developing through effort and practice. When we do well in school and are told that we are "so smart," "so clever," or "such a good student," this kind of praise implies that traits like smartness, cleverness, and goodness are qualities you either have or you don't. The net result: when learning something

new is truly difficult, smart-praise kids take it as sign that they aren't "good" and "smart," rather than as a sign to pay attention and try harder.

Incidentally, this is particularly true for women. As young girls, they learn to self-regulate (i.e., sit still and pay attention) more quickly than boys. Consequently they are more likely to be praised for "being good," and more likely to infer that "goodness" and "smartness" are innate qualities. In a study Dweck conducted in the 1980's, for instance, she found that bright girls, when given something to learn that was particularly foreign or complex, were quick to give up compared to bright boys — and the higher the girls' IQ, the more likely they were to throw in the towel. In fact, the straight-A girls showed the most helpless responses.

We continue to carry these beliefs, often unconsciously, around with us throughout our lives. And because bright kids are particularly likely to see their abilities as innate and unchangeable, they grow up to be adults who are far too hard on themselves — adults who will prematurely conclude that they don't have what it takes to succeed in a particular arena, and give up way too soon.

Even if every external disadvantage to an individual's rising to the top of an organization is removed — every inequality of opportunity, every unfair stereotype, all the challenges we face balancing work and family — we would still have to deal with the fact that through our mistaken beliefs about our abilities, we may be our own worst enemy.

How often have you found yourself avoiding challenges and playing it safe, sticking to goals you knew would be easy for you to reach? Are there things you decided long ago that you could never be good at? Skills you believed you would never possess? If the list is a long one, you were probably one of the bright kids — and your belief that you are "stuck" being exactly as you are has done more to determine the course of your life than you probably ever imagined. Which would be fine, if your abilities were innate and unchangeable. Only they're not.

No matter the ability — whether it's intelligence, creativity, self-control, charm, or athleticism — studies show them to be profoundly malleable. When it comes to mastering any skill, your experience, effort, and persistence matter a lot. So if you were a bright kid, it's time to toss out your (mistaken) belief about how ability works, embrace the fact that you can always improve, and reclaim the confidence to tackle any challenge that you lost so long ago.