

FOMO Addiction: The Fear of Missing Out

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As serendipity often strikes randomly, I was reading an article in *The New York Times* by Jenna Wortham the other day at the same time I was reading the chapter in Sherry Turkle's new book, [Alone Together](#) about people who fear they are missing out.

Teens and adults text while driving, because the possibility of a social connection is more important than their own lives (and the lives of others). They interrupt one call to take another, even when they don't know who's on the other line (but to be honest, we've been doing this for years before caller ID). They check their Twitter stream while on a date, because something more interesting or entertaining just *might* be happening.

It's not "interruption," it's connection. But wait a minute... it's not really "connection" either. It's the *potential* for simply a *different* connection. It may be better, it may be worse — we just don't know until we check.

We are so connected with one another through our Twitter streams and Foursquare check-ins, through our Facebook and LinkedIn updates, that we can't just be alone

anymore. The fear of missing out (FOMO) — on something more fun, on a social date that might just happen on the spur of the moment — is so intense, even when we've decided to disconnect, we still connect just once more, just to make sure.

Like the old-school Crackberry addict, we're now all in the grip of "FOMO addiction" ^{*} — the fear of missing out on something or someone more interesting, exciting or better than what we're currently doing.

Connected to this fear of missing out on something better that's going on without you are these fake personas we promote on websites like Facebook. I say "fake" because we often present only the best side of our lives on social networking sites. After all, who wants to be "friends" with someone who's always posting depressing status updates and who seems to be doing nothing interesting in their lives?

So they are indeed fake, because instead of us being completely real, many (most?) of us censor what we post to our social media profile these days. The people on Facebook are often simply their idealized selves — with a bit of misery thrown in from time to time to "keep it real."

A friend who works in advertising told me that she felt fine about her life — until she opened Facebook. "Then I'm thinking, 'I am 28, with three roommates, and oh, it looks like you have a precious baby and a mortgage,'" she said. "And then I wanna die."

On those occasions, she said, her knee-jerk reaction is often to post an account of a cool thing she has done, or to upload a particularly fun picture from her weekend. This may make her feel better — but it can generate FOMO in another unsuspecting person.

Or as Sherry Turkle notes,

"Sometimes you don't have time for your friends except if they're online," is a common complaint. [...]

When is downtime, when is stillness? The text-driven world of rapid response does not make self-reflection impossible, but does little to cultivate it.

Turkle's descriptions of some of the teens who've told her their story is downright scary. Teens who believe they need to be available 24/7 to their friends, because, you know, someone might get dumped or into an argument with their parents. They need instant gratification and solace. Nobody can wait anymore — not because they can't — but **because they don't need to**.

After all, if you could eat all the ice cream sundaes in the world without any serious repercussions (like weight gain or being sick), why wouldn't you? That's how many of us our nowadays ingesting social media and technology — taking in as much as we can, simply because we think we can.

But it's a lie we're telling ourselves. Humans weren't built this way.

Turkle nails it on the head with this comment in the article:

“In a way, there’s an immaturity to our relationship with technology,” she said. “It’s still evolving.”

I think that succinctly summarizes the problem — our relationship with technology is still in its infancy, and we’re still feeling our ways around it. We don’t quite know how to interact well — mindfully, meaningfully — with it. Count how many times you check your email or smartphone for messages, texts, status updates, etc. in a day. 10? 100? 1,000 or more? You may be surprised.

Technology that we’re at one with and that promotes social balance and harmony wouldn’t require such obsessive checking behavior, would it? It would understand and complement natural human social behavior. It would differentiate for us what’s important and what’s not (the idea of “smart agents” from a decade ago still resonates).

Teens think they “get it” — that technology is a natural extension of their social lives. But they’re mistaken — they’re still crafting their lives around the technology and the social connections they entice us with, rather than the other way around. They stay up all night waiting for the next status update. They interrupt a face-to-face conversation to make sure whatever’s going on elsewhere isn’t better. I wonder how this is a good way to promote future, strong social connections?

I have my doubts.

I believe, much to their detriment, that the makers of social networking technologies have some rough idea — but not in any nuanced or scientific way — how the tools and products they create are changing human behavior. (If these companies really wanted to take their efforts to the next stage, they should consider hiring some psychologists!) It’s an impulse control problem — we cannot easily control our impulse to “check” the technology to ensure something “more important” isn’t waiting our immediate attention.

The reality is that there are few things so truly important in life, they can’t wait. Sure, I understand it if you’re the President of the United States — you have a legitimate reason to check your texts during dinner. But everyone else, not so much. We’re succumbing to our FOMO when we do so.

Fear of missing out (FOMO) is a very real feeling that’s starting to permeate through our social relationships. The question is — will we ever settle for what we have, rather than cling to the fear that we may be missing out on something better? Social media like Facebook and Twitter are making this increasingly more difficult.

Read the full article: [How Social Media Can Induce Feelings of ‘Missing Out’](#)

* – I use the word “addiction” here firmly tongue in cheek, to emphasize how extreme some of these behaviors can be. I do not believe in FOMO addiction any more than I believe in [Internet addiction](#).