



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

staying sane in the digital age

We've come a long way, baby! I feel a little like my grandfather must have felt when I took him to a movie more than 30 years ago and he was blown away that they were selling hotdogs at the concession stand! The advances in technology are mind boggling, growing all the time and radically changing how we live.

The benefits to mental health are myriad. We can go online and find tests that will tell us if our symptoms qualify for a diagnosis of depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorder, and a host of other problems. Resources for coping with almost any problem are accessible instantaneously. On-line support groups allow us to interact with others who have the same issues and share coping techniques. Therapists, support groups, and clinics offer information about their services so that we can compare and make wise choices. We can sign petitions and easily contact people to let them hear our voices, engendering a sense of efficacy and making a difference. Facebook and Twitter allow us to stay in constant touch with friends. Email allows us to communicate instantaneously, efficiently and effectively.

On the other hand, I know we have all made ourselves a little crazy by Googling a symptom or a diagnosis and being overwhelmed by the information—especially the catastrophic kind. We are inundated by so much information it is difficult to absorb and respond. Much of the information is designed to alarm us about issues—the environment, gun control, women's health, economics, etc.—in the hope that we will take action to prevent the feared outcome. The number of problems we face as a nation can feel quite overwhelming. Email has become the bane of some people's lives. All the time saving aspects of technology do not seem to have resulted in us having more free time, in fact it feels like we are even busier.

We are so inundated by technology, the normal opportunities to be alone that used to occur during the course of a day have all but vanished. We used to be left to our own thoughts as we waited in line at the grocery store, or when we were walking someplace or performing other tasks. Now we have smart phones that keep us in contact with others/Facebook/Internet at every moment. Many people don't even talk over their

phones, but only use them to text, for games, for Internet access. People text or email when they are in the same room rather than speaking. Between our busyness and technology, I fear our face-to-face time (not Skype!) is dwindling and I wonder what the effects of all this will be on us as human beings. It takes effort to make time to be with friends. It takes effort to preserve our limited time for silence and stillness—a place to experience wonder and awe.

What do we do in the face of such overwhelming busyness and information? I find myself going back to the wisdom of spiritual traditions. We face each day with a choice. Do we move through the day in love or in fear? A spirit of love opens our hearts, relaxes our bodies, and is accompanied by attitudes of compassion, cooperation, and hope. Love does not deny problems that are present, but fosters coping with those problems in a way that promotes harmony and problem solving. Love brings us together in whatever ways are possible for us.

Moving through the day in fear brings about a whole different effect. I am not talking about momentary fear that can prompt life-saving actions. I am talking about chronic fear that closes us down, produces tension in our bodies, and is accompanied by suspicion, distrust, and anxiety. We tend to see others as competitors and enemies. Coping with problems out of fear promotes impatience, intolerance, and aggression. Fear pushes people away, except for those who share and encourage our fears.

How does this relate to use of the Internet? Every day we have a myriad of technological wonders available to us. As I consider what to investigate, what to pursue, what to pass on to friends, and how to spend the very limited time I have on this earth, I hope to be able to hold these questions in my mind: Does this action contribute to an attitude of love or fear? Does this action enhance my experience as a human being, bring me closer to others and make the world a better place or me a better person? I may not always make the best choice, but I hope that carrying the questions in my heart helps me to remember what is most important as I navigate my day. h&h

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