

# The surprisingly positive power of texting, according to science

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Three teenagers are lost in their phones while in Trafalgar Square in London, England. Photo by: In Pictures Ltd./Corbis via Getty Images

Texting gets blamed for many problems these days.

On the news it often gets blamed for reducing people's attention spans. Other days it gets blamed for making people feel more isolated. Texting has also been blamed for damaging the spine, a condition called "text neck."

Still, some experts say the negativity is unfair. Texting can and should be a positive force for people's emotional and physical health, they say, as long as it's used correctly.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) psychologist Sherry Turkle wrote the book "Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age."

Texting itself isn't the problem, she says. "The trouble is what happens to face-to-face conversation if your phone is always there."

**Texting Can Improve Relationships, Communications**

If done well, Turkle and other experts said, texting can improve interpersonal relationships. It can also help people deal with traumatic events and connect different generations of people.

There are also medical uses, including improved communication with health experts and in medical studies.

Eric Topol is digital health expert at the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California. He admitted he's not a huge fan of texting – but said even he has to acknowledge its benefits.

It all comes down to when and how you text, according to Turkle and Tchiki Davis, who holds an advanced degree in psychology and writes about well-being technology. Both said there's one key rule of texting: Don't do it when you're around other people.

### **Don't Use Phone At The Dinner Table**

If you're out to dinner with friends, keep your phone out of sight, Turkle said. Even leaving the turned-off phone visible on the table will make conversations more trivial, and will reduce the possibility of "empathetic communication," Turkle said. She warned some people use texting to avoid difficult face-to-face interactions.

We need to feel open in relationships, Turkle said. We should ask, "Is texting keeping me away from a necessary conversation?' If not, enjoy."

It's better to keep from texting even around total strangers, Davis said. She mentioned that when traveling home from work, people whip out their phones and disappear into their screens, ignoring their fellow passengers on the bus or the subway.

"A whole body of research shows we can improve your well-being even through just tiny interactions with strangers," Davis said.

### **Reach Out To Others In Need**

Once you're truly alone, go ahead and break out your phone, Turkle and Davis said – but be thoughtful about who and what you text. Think of texting friends and family and consider who might be feeling lonely or dealing with a difficult situation.

If you yourself are struggling, texting a loved one is a great way to handle it, Davis said.

"Studies have shown that people who text and reach out to others experience less pain," Davis said. "It can be used to cope and just kind of deal with challenging situations."

Try not to gossip via text, Davis says. Write longer, fuller messages to reduce the chance the receiver misreads something you've sent. Text your friends memes or videos you think they'd find amusing. Use more exclamation points.

### **Keeping Your Parents Informed, In The Loop**

Turkle said texting is an especially good way for parents to connect with their adult children. Turkle's daughter recently went shopping for a wedding dress without Turkle. So, her daughter sent pictures of different dresses.

Turkle said the messages made her feel close to her daughter.

More doctors, scientific researchers, and mental-health advocates are using texting in everyday work, Topol said.

For physicians and their patients, texting offers a quick way of getting in touch. Turkle remembered one night recently when she noticed a rash on her calf. She texted her doctor a picture of the rash and asked whether she needed to visit the emergency room.

He quickly replied, "You ate something, don't worry," Turkle said. She thinks "sending photographs is going to be a big part of the future of medicine."

### **Academic Research, Text-Based Support**

The ease, speed, and universality of texting also makes it powerful for research, Topol said. Over the course of the past five years, texting has been used to collect information in dozens of important health studies.

About 70 percent of the world likely has cellphones, and that makes it easier for participants to get involved and respond to researchers.

Texting allows for immediate feedback. Most people are also more likely to reply to a text than an email.

Texting is also affecting the mental-health world. In recent years, advocates have started suicide and mental-health support lines that exclusively offer text-based support.

Suicides usually happen because of events and situations that make life temporarily unbearable. Mental health disorders or substance abuse are associated with most suicides. Often, family and friends do not recognize the warning signs or underlying mental health issues leading to a suicide.

People who have mental illnesses can be treated with medication and therapy.

### **Lean On Me Aids College Students**

Lean On Me offers an all-hours service targeted to help college students. The organization, launched in 2016 by current and former MIT students, connects texters with volunteer peer supporters. Lean On Me has since expanded to seven college campuses.

"Sometimes students need a quick outlet to vent about their day, talk about a frustration, or simply hold a conversation," Lean On Me staffer Shaye Carver wrote in an email. With texting, users can "take as much time as they want to reflect on how they feel."

### **Museum Interacts With Patrons**

Others are using text lines in more whimsical ways. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in summer 2017 kicked off a program called "Send Me" that allows anyone to text the museum a request to see a particular item. In return, a computer algorithm sends a piece of SFMOMA art that matches the requested item.

At the height of the craziness, the museum handled about 70,000 texts per hour, according to Jay Mollica, the museum's creative technologist.

He attributes Send Me's success to the "personal" nature of texting, a medium used mostly to stay in touch with close friends and family.

"In the morning people will say, 'Send me coffee,' he says. "And late at night they'll say things like 'Send me friends.'"

As of July 2018, the top requested terms on Send Me were "love," "hearts," "cats," "dogs," "purple" and "happiness."

## Quiz

1 Which two sentences from the article include MAIN ideas of the article?

1. *Texting has also been blamed for damaging the spine, a condition called "text neck."*
2. *If done well, Turkle and other experts said, texting can improve interpersonal relationships.*
3. *There are also medical uses, including improved communication with health experts and in medical studies.*
4. *Write longer, fuller messages to reduce the chance the receiver misreads something you've sent.*

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 1 and 4
- (D) 3 and 4

2 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

- (A) About 70 percent of the people in the world now likely own cellphones they can use to send texts.
- (B) Research shows face-to-face interactions with strangers can improve our well-being.
- (C) Texting has been blamed for reducing attention spans and making people feel more isolated.
- (D) Experts say texting a loved one or a special service can help people deal with pain or frustration.

3 How does the author convey the importance of texting thoughtfully?

- (A) by highlighting the damage that can be done to close relationships by sending mean or gossiping texts
- (B) by exploring the idea that when and how people text can affect how they feel and interact with others
- (C) by describing the background and education of the experts whose opinions are featured in the article
- (D) by identifying the benefits to research that come from many people now having cellphones

4 What is the author's MAIN purpose for including information about the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art?

- (A) to emphasize how texting can be used in new ways to brighten someone's day
- (B) to elaborate on the ways that algorithms can be used to make texting easier
- (C) to illustrate which subjects people are most interested in seeing in artwork
- (D) to indicate it can be hard for people to visit art museums that are far away