EIGHT

DIGITAL SOLITUDE IS IMPOSSIBLE

Why you can't be on your own and on your phone.

what's the problem?

> We fill our days with ongoing connection, denying ourselves time to think and dream.
>
> SHERRY TURKLE[207]

Our experience of solitude has always been shaped by technology. The printing press, the telephone, the TV and even the postal service all changed what it meant to be alone. So on the face of it, using digital technology or social media while alone is just another form of networked solitude. We're physically alone, but psychologically connected to others, just as we would be if we wrote a letter or watched a film in solitude. But I would argue that modern, digitally connected solitude is different by nature from other, earlier forms.

Rather than helping us achieve our own purposes, the digital world overrides them or exploits them for its own ends. It uses novelty, intrigue and spectacle to aggressively hijack our attention in ways that other experiences – like reading or listening to music – just don't. It promises quick, frictionless human connection that exerts a powerful emotional pull, yet leaves us unfulfilled. It flatters us that we're the centre of the world, and that everything out there

is somehow for, or about, ourselves. In reality, though, it's run by powerful corporations who make fat profits from all our clicking, sharing and browsing, and use their formidable intelligence to keep us online, engaged and – let's be honest – addicted.

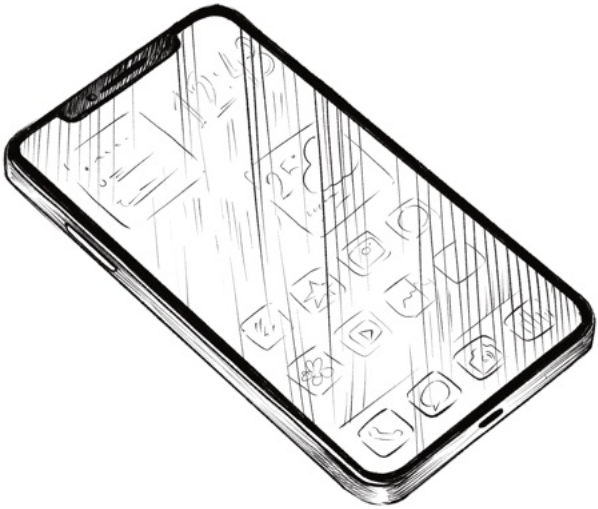
All this makes it harder to choose, sustain and enjoy solitude when digital technology is involved. If we stay connected to the digital world during solitude, we can end up degrading the very things that make solitude worth having: a calm mood, a reflective mindset and a deeper awareness of ourselves and the world.

get off your phone

The invention of the smartphone changed solitude for ever.

No doubt, cultural artefacts like books and records can be beautiful things, but they're still static and inert. Your phone is something else entirely: a fluid and infinitely flattering mirror to the self. Eagerly unlocking at your merest touch or glance, it presents you with a constellation of your chosen apps. By allowing you to curate the content (and people) you prefer, it puts you at the centre of your own digital world, guaranteeing that there will always be someone or something that speaks to you.

However, it goes even deeper than that. Several studies have found that the boundary between the 'human self' and the smartphone is becoming blurred, and we see our phones as part of our 'extended selves'.[208] The more our happy memories are linked to our phones – through photos, messages and so on – the stronger this feeling gets. That's why allowing someone else to touch your phone, or even just look at it, feels so weird and invasive. It's also why spending time without your phone can make you feel tense and strung out, like you've left a part of yourself behind and you need to get it back.



Phones are a physical possession, a part of yourself and a window on your world, all at the same time. That's what makes them so different from all the other objects in your life. Phones have a unique hold over us, and they arouse strong emotions – not always positive.

> …the mobile [phone] mixes up presence and absence, me/not-me, subject and object; and it seems to mix these things up in *us*. Such mixing can provoke anxieties.[209]

Technology becomes a problem when the user becomes the used. So have we reached that point with our phones? Well, the numbers don't lie. In one survey, Americans were found to check their phones around fifty-two times a day,[210] while eighty-nine percent say they interrupted their last social interaction to look at their phone.[211]

The Smartphone Addiction Scale (SAS), developed by a team of Korean academics,[212] looks at factors like being unable to control your phone use, taking your phone to the toilet, feeling stressed

when there's no Wi-Fi or being told to 'get off your phone'. While phone addicts are using their devices, they feel calm, excited, cosy, confident, or liberated. On the other hand, they can never really feel good when they're without them, and may begin to suffer from nomophobia – the fear of being without a phone. Sound familiar?

always somewhere else

> And yet our dear self is so wearisome to us that we can scarcely support its conversation for an hour together.
>
> Abraham Cowley[213]

As we saw in chapter four, one of the main benefits of solitude is the chance to be with ourselves in the here-and-now. But the digital world actively encourages the exact opposite. Whenever we want to escape ourselves, or an empty moment, our phones are there, eager to whisk us away. If we don't want to spend any time with our 'dear selves', we don't have to. And if we don't like one avenue of distraction, another one is always close at hand.

Although we talk about phone addiction, what really attracts us is not the technology itself, but the human connection that it promises. Social media gives us the feeling of sharing something with someone else – a joke, interest, idea, taste, judgement, emotion or experience. That makes us feel validated and valued; in internet-speak, we feel *seen*. The moment may be brief, the connection weak, the relationship shallow or even fake – but it still gives us that little shot of emotion we're looking for. So we keep going back.

> We desire to be seen and acknowledged. To exercise meaningful degrees of agency and judgment. In short, to belong and to matter. Social media trades on these

> desires, exploits them, deforms them, and never truly satisfies them, which explains a good deal of the madness.
>
> L.M. SACASAS[214]

Humans are social animals, which is why this promise of connection has such a powerful hold. But it has its dark side too. The digital world places itself between us and the world, mediating our lived experience for its own ends. It pulls our attention outwards, away from ourselves and the here-and-now. Social media is constantly telling us – or taunting us – that something better is happening somewhere else, and we're missing out. Lured by that promise, we subordinate our own experience to someone else's.

> The tragedy is that the stroll, the camping trip, and the face-to-face chat are now themselves suffused with digital ephemera. *Here* is under constant bombardment from *elsewhere*.
>
> NICHOLAS CARR[215]

Thanks to social media, we see our lives through a sharing lens. Everything we do, think or see is a potential post. All day long, we're thinking *Could I share this? Should I? Would people like it?* We might even feel pressure to do something that's *worthy* of being shared, or worry that what we're doing isn't shareworthy enough. If we're not using our phones with our hands, we're using them in our minds.

We might also feel that because we *can* make ourselves available at all times, we should do so. The pressure might come from other people or ourselves – but either way, it's emotionally exhausting:

> In solitude, we don't reject the world, but have the space to think our own thoughts. But if your phone is always with you, seeking solitude can look suspiciously like hiding.
>
> SHERRY TURKLE[216]

In the digital world, numbers are everything. We measure our worth in metrics that masquerade as aspects of human life, but actually reflect technological functions and statistics: likes, followers, connections, notifications. The more we share and engage, the higher the numbers climb and the more digital rewards we receive.

All this counting encourages us to compare ourselves with others and internalise their judgements. At the time when teenagers should be doing their 'psychological homework' (chapter seven) and becoming young adults, they're looking outwards, comparing themselves to their peers or, worse, an unattainable ideal of beauty, corroding their body image.[217] In chapter three, we saw how being 'on stage' all the time is unbearable; a phone plus social media plus peer pressure makes it practically unavoidable.

None of this has happened by accident. Big Tech is deeply suspicious of solitude. Social media platforms do not want us out on a windy hillside somewhere, thinking thoughts that are never tweeted or taking photos that are never shared, because that private

experience is not open to analysis and monetisation. There are no likes for self-knowledge, no stars for self-reflection, no comments on leaving your phone at home.

> Society is growing ever more skeptical of the value of solitude, ever more suspicious of even the briefest of withdrawals into inactivity and apparent purposelessness… We see it in the general desire to make all experience interactive and transactional.
>
> NICHOLAS CARR[218]

The medium is the message, and the message from our phones is crystal clear: online life is exciting, dynamic and social, while offline life is dull, lonely and staid. Why would you leave your phone at home, or switch it off? Why limit the great stuff you can enjoy? Why cut yourself off from the world?

In the digital world, everything is on our terms. We can choose when and how we engage, and who with. But as Sherry Turkle explains, nothing comes for free:

> When offered something that can make things easier, we forget our human purposes… In our excitement about how great a technology makes us feel or how amazing it is that a technology can do *x* or *y*… we forget the more important question: What is the *human value* of *x* and *y*?[219]

So if we allow the digital world to invade our time alone, are we gaining human value, or giving it up? And if we have gained something of value, what might we have sacrificed in return?

pay attention

Our attention is the origin of everything we do and achieve. To understand a situation, solve a problem or learn to do a task, we must first focus our attention on it. Sustained attention is what allows us to follow through and reach our goals – but when our attention is scattered, our energy is dissipated and wasted. And crucially, attention is a choice: we *decide* what we'll pay attention *to*. That's what makes the difference between just looking and actually seeing, or between vaguely listening and truly hearing.

We can think of attention as a possession as well as a power. We can't pay attention to everything all the time, because there are only so many minutes in a day, and so many neurons in our brains. That's why the phrase 'paying attention' is so appropriate. Our attention is like a fund of cognitive 'currency', and if we spend it on one thing, we can't spend it on another. Moreover, when we 'consume' content online, it's also consuming something of ours: our attention.

This leads naturally to the idea of the *attention economy*, popularised in the late 1990s by Michael Goldhaber:

> We are drowning in information, yet constantly increasing our generation of it. So a key question arises: Is there something else that flows through cyberspace, something that is scarce and desirable? There is… It's called attention. And the economy of attention—not information—is the natural economy of cyberspace.[220]

Twenty-five years on, Goldhaber's prescient vision has become all too real. Whenever we go online, we find ourselves amid a frantic battle for our attention, constantly at risk of tumbling down a rabbit-hole of distraction. One minute we're reading the headlines, the next we're watching a random cat video. Content that we had no

knowledge of, let alone interest in, until about ten seconds ago, is suddenly at the very centre of our attention. Every site and app does everything it can to capture our attention and turn it into profit.

> They're coming for every second of your life… No matter how nice they try to be, they're trying to get more engagement from you… Every single free moment you have is a moment you could be looking at your phone.
>
> BO BURNHAM[221]

It's an unequal struggle, to say the least. In Hank Green's words, 'The most sophisticated software in existence is tasked with figuring out how to keep you from leaving a website.'[222]

Social media promises connection on demand: it's like a sausage machine where we put in our own words and feelings, turn the handle and a bit of attention pops out. But when our attention is mediated by digital technology, that technology is attending to *us* at the same time, through its algorithms and analytics. That is not being 'seen' by another person, but merely analysed by a machine. When we let Big Tech into our solitude, we give corporations a free pass to inspect, dissect and redirect our attention.

> Solitude has become a resource. Like all resources, it can be harvested and hoarded, taken up by powerful forces without permission or inquiry, and then transformed into private wealth, until the fields of empty space we once took for granted first dwindle, then disappear.
>
> MICHAEL HARRIS[223]

arguing about nothing

Having said all that, there's no doubt that social media can expand your horizons. Using Twitter for a decade or so has shown me countless other lives, experiences and viewpoints that I'd never have encountered otherwise. It's made me more thoughtful, more tolerant and more broad-minded – or so I like to think.

However, the downside to diverse opinions is the divisions between them. Twitter, in particular, seems to actively encourage conflict by amplifying the extremes. There are only two views on any issue, and we must choose a side and defend it to the last. Everyone on our side is good, right and well-intentioned, while the other lot are irredeemably stupid or evil and act only in bad faith.

Pretty soon, the original issue fades into the background, as we obsess over the reactions to it, and our own reactions to those reactions, and how other people might judge our reactions, or our failure to react. We become preoccupied with policing language, evaluating others' emotions or vetting the membership of our own communities. Actively encouraged by Twitter's 'quote-tweet' function, we spiral into a meta-discourse of tweets about tweets.

When this happens, we neglect the people behind the content. We forget – perhaps even *choose* to forget – that we're talking to living, breathing people, with feelings and failings of their own.

> When I am on Twitter, I find myself hating everything and everyone – especially myself – wasting their lives arguing about nothing. I lose my ability to empathise, to see humanity beyond the avatars. Never am I more disconnected than when I am plugged in.
>
> MOYA LOTHIAN-MCLEAN[224]

These days, instead of plunging into the fray, I try to remind myself that there are a range of opinions on *every* issue, and that I'm unlikely to influence anybody's outlook with an angry online retort. Having found that social media enhances a good mood but worsens a bad one, I take my own irritation and despondency as a sign that I shouldn't be online at all. Otherwise, I start treating social media like a digital casino: scrolling on endlessly like I'm spinning a roulette wheel or a slot machine, hoping for some nebulous jackpot, when what I really need to do is cash in my chips and walk away.

how to switch off

Knowing all this is one thing, but successfully saying no to it is another. You may already agree with a lot of what I'm saying, but still find it almost impossible to stay offline for even a short time. Becoming a gatekeeper of your own mind is no small thing.

As I said in chapter one, this isn't a self-help book. But having dwelt on the problem at such length, I feel I should offer a solution of some sort. So here goes.

Firstly, I suggest reflecting honestly on how the digital experience actually is for you. Next time you reach for your phone, ask yourself some useful questions. Why do you need to check your socials right now? What will happen if you don't? What are you hoping to find?

When you're online, stop for a moment and notice how you're feeling. Are you happy and carefree, or fretful and obsessed? Are you calm and centred, or tense and strung out? Then ask yourself how you *want* to feel, and how you could bring that about.

Another question you could ask is *cui bono* – who benefits? Facebook doesn't care how you feel. It just wants you online every day doing your job, which is to post content that will engage other people and put some padding around the adverts. As poker players

say, 'If you look round the table and you don't know who the sucker is, it's you.'

When we think of attention as cognitive 'cash', that helps us reflect on where we 'spend' it. However, it can also bind us to a financial perspective where *everything* is a transaction. There are aspects of life that can't be calculated, quantified and compared: intimacies like family, friendship and love, and joyful solitary experiences like meditation, nature, music or art. When we think about these things, the question is not where to 'invest' our attention for the best possible 'return', but our deeper sense of *what is good*. What is unique, irreplaceable or unrepeatable about this moment? What is its essential human value? And what's the best way for us to honour and nurture that value?

One way to deepen your appreciation is to imagine that you're doing something for the last time. We're usually aware when we do things for the first time, but the last time can pass by unnoticed. When we're living through it, we think it's just another time, with plenty more to come in the future. Only later do we realise that the last time has already been and gone.

The idea of attention as a resource can also lock us into a mindset of scarcity and not-enough-ness. When you're convinced that your attention is somehow insufficient for the life you lead, you inevitably feel like you're spinning too many plates. Instead, you could try thinking that *you already have all the attention you need*.[225] Then, instead of fretting about malign forces 'stealing' your attention, you can contemplate what you should really be attending to, and why.

As well as treating others as they would like to be treated, we can extend the same mindfulness to objects and ideas. How would the view prefer to be seen? How would the book like to be read? How would the record choose to be heard? 'Everything waits to be noticed,' as Art Garfunkel sang.[226] Will we respond?

The digital world may be new(ish), but the issues it raises have always been with us. In a letter to his friend Lollius Maximus, the

Roman poet Horace invites him to consider 'how you can get through your life in a peaceable, tranquil way'. Urging Lollius to rise above 'hope and fear about trivial things', he asks:

> Where does virtue come from; is it from books?
> Or is it a gift from Nature that cannot be learned?
> What is the way to become a friend to yourself?
> What brings tranquillity?
> What makes you carefree?[227]

Horace raises the ultimate question of our lives: *what do you want?* And our answer depends on where and how we direct our attention.

Going further, instead of thinking of attention as something we *have*, maybe we should reframe it as something we *do*. It's not a resource we own and allocate, but a process we follow: *attending* as opposed to attention. We should develop our attending skills so we can better attend to the world, other people and ourselves.

While attention is an abstract concept, attending is a mental and physical act. We attend with our minds, but also with our bodies and senses. For example, attending to the digital world might involve holding your phone, touching its screen, looking at text and video and listening to speech and music. To understand how your ways of attending affect you, notice how your body feels when you're online. Are you relaxed? Are you frowning or smiling? Are you holding your breath, tensing your shoulders, grinding your teeth? In Horace's words, is your experience bringing tranquillity and making you carefree? Or is it more like the opposite of that?

By reaching for our phones over and over again, we turn digital habits into physical ones. Once these routines are encoded into muscle memory, we follow them with almost no conscious effort. For example, when writing gets tough – as it always does – my reflex is to bolt to Twitter, where I can merrily dissipate the very energies that should be going into my work. I'm hardly aware of thinking,

now I will check Twitter; it just seems to happen. As we repeat 'distraction routines' like this, we unwittingly train our attention to run on certain tracks, and leave others unexplored. By unthinkingly giving in to our short-term desires, we betray our long-term wants. To prevent that, we need to attend to what is going on for us, break into the routine and choose what we really want instead.

You don't have to throw your phone away or do a week-long 'digital detox'. You can just decide not to go online *for now*. 'For now' can be as long as you want, or as long as you can make it today.

Back in the day, I was a twenty-a-day smoker. Cigarettes were a reward for wins, a consolation for losses, an enhancement to the good times and a comfort during the bad – and a companion in solitude. Nowadays, instead of lighting up, I reach for my phone.

I eventually kicked the tobacco habit with a book that explained how grand gestures and determined resolutions don't work, because they merely accentuate the deprivation. Smoking will always be there, and ex-smokers will always have *some* desire to smoke; that fire can never be stubbed out. So instead of 'giving up', you have to keep making a conscious, positive choice for what you want *instead* of smoking, from moment to moment.[228]

Finally, while it's good to cultivate self-responsibility, it shouldn't curdle into self-blame. You are not wrong or broken just because you use your phone a lot, and your 'inattention' is not a disease that needs to be cured. It's just that you might want to make some different choices in certain situations. What's more, you don't have to become a hermit; you can still spend time in the digital world in the right measure, as long as you willingly choose it and genuinely enjoy it. When you're on your phone, be on your phone – but when you're on your own, be on your own.