

# Texting can be positive and powerful, 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 a bad rap. It's blamed for everything from fostering social isolation to increasing teens' risk of ADHD to driving down adolescent self-esteem to damaging the spine — a phenomenon known as "text neck."

But some technological and medical experts say the negativity is unfair and overblown. Texting can and should be a positive force in people's lives, both in terms of emotional and physical health, they say - so long as it's used correctly.

"I have a reputation as sort of being the Darth Vader of anything that has to do with texting," said MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle, author of "Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age." "Which, of course, is not really what I have said or am saying - the problem really isn't that people have this new, interesting, intimate way of touching base ... the trouble is what happens to face-to-face conversation if your phone is always there."

If done well, Turkle and other experts said, texting can improve interpersonal relationships, help people deal with traumatic events and bridge intergenerational gaps. Research backs this up. A 2012 study conducted by psychologists at the University of California at Berkeley found that sending and receiving text messages boosted texters' moods when they were feeling upset or lonely.

There are also medical applications: Texting eases communication with personal doctors, advances research as an easy and accurate way of gathering patient information in scientific studies, and can offer support to at-risk or suicidal individuals via instant-response crisis text lines. Eric Topol, digital health expert and executive vice president of the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California, admitted he's not a huge fan of texting - but said even he has been forced to acknowledge its benefits.

"I'm not a big texter, [but] I also recognize it has many attributes for promoting health," he said.

It all comes down to when and how you text, according to Turkle and Tchiki Davis, who holds a doctorate in psychology and studies, writes and consults on well-being technology. Both said there's one cardinal rule of texting: Don't do it when you're around other people.

If you're out to dinner with friends, put your phone away and keep it out of sight, Turkle said. Even leaving the phone — turned off and face down — 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.

"Don't let it turn you away from the necessary vulnerability you need to feel in relationships," Turkle said. "Is texting keeping me away from a necessary conversation? If not, enjoy."

It's better to refrain from texting even around total strangers, Davis said. She mentioned what she called a classic scenario — when commuting home from work at the end of a long day, people whip out their phones and disappear into their screens, ignoring their fellow passengers on the bus or the subway.

"The research would suggest you would get more out of your experience if you try to interact with strangers — a whole body of research shows we can improve your well-being even through just tiny interactions with strangers," Davis said. "Basically, anytime you're with another person, I would recommend keeping your phone off or on silent."

Once you're completely and truly alone, go ahead and break out your phone, Turkle and Davis said — but be thoughtful about who and what you text. Run through your roster of friends and family and consider who might be feeling lonely or confronting a difficult situation. Then shoot them a message.

And 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. Do reach out to others if you're alone and need support."

There are smaller things you can do to improve your texting life, too, Davis said. Try not to gossip via text. 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.

Turkle said texting is an especially good way for parents to connect with their adult children. Turkle's daughter is getting married and recently went shopping for a wedding dress. Though Turkle couldn't come along, her daughter texted her pictures of different dresses, often accompanied by question marks.

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

"It gives you a sense of co-presence - the little dots give you the fantasy of, it's happening as you're there with it," Turkle said. "I think now parents and children are able to stay in touch in a much better way because of texting and have a greater sense of continuity of presence."

More and more doctors, scientific researchers and mental-health advocates are using texting in their everyday work and are realizing its benefits, Topol said.

For physicians and their patients, texting offers a quick and non-intrusive way of getting in touch. Turkle remembered one night a few weeks ago when she noticed a rash on her calf. It would have been a "big deal" to call her doctor past 9 p.m. at night — so instead, she texted him a picture of the rash and asked whether she needed to visit the emergency room. He replied right away.

"He said, 'You ate something, don't worry,'" Turkle said. "This is amazing and we know that kind of medicine where you're going to be able to be in that kind of contact with practitioners through texting and sending photographs is going to be a big part of the future of medicine."

The ease, speed and ubiquity of texting also renders it a powerful asset for research, Topol said. Over the course of the past five years, texting has been used to collect information in dozens of randomized trials studying things such as pregnancy, blood pressure and diabetes, he said.

Texting offers several key advantages for this kind of data gathering, according to Topol: It expands the scope and size of randomized trials because, given that nearly 70 percent of the world's population likely has cellphones, it can be done almost anywhere around the globe. It reduces "labor intensiveness" because researchers are not forced to play "phone tag" with trial participants. It can be done algorithmically, eliminating the need for human intervention. It allows for immediate feedback. And finally, most people are more likely to reply to a text than an email.

"Most people respect getting texts, that is, it's high on their priority list of things to do," Topol said.

Texting is also making a mark in the arena of mental health. In recent years, advocates have started suicide and mental-health support lines that exclusively offer text-based support. Crisis Text Line, founded in 2013, offers 24/7 help — connecting texters with trained crisis counselors - throughout the United States. As of July 2018, the group had received and responded to over 75 million texts.

Lean On Me offers a similar all-hours service, but specifically targeted to college students. The organization, launched in 2016 by a handful of MIT undergraduates and one alumnus, connects texters with volunteer peer supporters. Since its founding, Lean On Me has expanded to seven college campuses, including MIT's.

"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. "I don't think vulnerability necessarily requires face-to-face interaction. ... Texting allows users to respond in a minute or an hour and take as much time as they want to reflect on how they feel."

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

Send Me quickly went viral. At the height of the craziness, the museum handled about 3 million texts in one month at a peak rate of about 70,000 text messages per hour, according to Jay Mollica, the museum's creative technologist.

A year later, Mollica said that Send Me is still "going strong" as a "very positive, good vibes machine." 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.

"So the personal aspect of texting is I think what made people get really attached to it," Mollica said. "People's relationship to the service is very personal - so in the morning people will say, 'Send me coffee.' In the afternoon they'll say, 'Send me beer.' And late at night they'll say things like 'Send me friends.'"

As of July 2018, the top requested items on Send Me were all "serendipitous," Mollica said - including the terms "love," "hearts," "cats," "dogs," "purple" and "happiness."