

# Wendy Riemann: Disconnect from the phone and reconnect with the world

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The invention of garage door openers allowed us to drive right inside our house without needing to greet our neighbors.

Drive-thru windows were soon to follow, making it convenient to not talk to fellow customers.

Delivery for groceries, and almost everything else imaginable, now makes it possible to avoid interacting with other human beings in grocery stores, box stores, and malls.

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And younger people are moving to more metropolitan cities to be where the action is and have resources within walking distance, yet, when they step out, they often do so hidden behind a screen.

Even though we are technically more connected than ever, are we more disconnected to the people around us? Have our phones become our childhood blankies – never leave home without it or risk sheer meltdown? Are we growing to become more cyberized than humanized?

Try sitting in a coffee shop for 45 minutes without a phone observing the behavior of others. It does not paint a pretty picture for human connection.

We meet up with people for coffee, lunch, or dinner, but often spend part, or even all that time, on the phone with someone other than the person who made time to meet us. But it is work... but they are on their phone too... but, but, but...

Then, when we are physically together, how much of the conversation is dominated by what we saw on our phones compared to real conversation that stems beyond the weather, politics, or day-to-day life? Are we taking the superficial route by discussing the latest meme or what he texted, instead of listening and asking in-depth questions? Is it just easier to let phones run our lives?

Researchers at Baylor University found female students spend up to ten hours a day, and males eight hours, texting, emailing, and on social media.

It is any wonder businesses report soft skills, like interpersonal communication, are drastically lacking in job candidates? People no longer know how to hold an actual conversation or keep one going without their phone.

I love my phone. It keeps me responsive, informed, and often improves my productivity. I understand that sometimes we are waiting on a client email or need the health update of a struggling friend. However, if we are honestly assessing, most of the time we need to create a better phone-use balance, and we need to do it for ourselves and the people we care about, not because it is trending.

Think about personal phone habits. Are friends and family getting the undivided attention they deserve? Researchers at the University of Southern Maine found that even having a phone visibly out, such as sitting on the table, distracted people. Individuals who could see their phone scored 20 percent LOWER on a test than those who had their phone away.

Twenty percent! Most of us know how ugly that 20 percent looks with other people texting and driving. Translate that to our own meeting and dinner terms – from the start, a person with a phone out is essentially suggesting the other individuals are 20 percent less valued, or the person with the phone is concentrating 20 percent less on them. Trust fades. Empathy disappears. Imagine how much more the value decreases as that phone is being used during the conversation. While this is bad enough behavior for our friends and family who take time to meet or eat with us, how much worse is that for a business contact or in advocating a message?

Try really reconnecting with relationships this week... Don't remember how?

Consider the following:

- Go an entire meal without looking at the phone or mentioning it.
- Avoid mundane questions like, “how was your day,” that generate stagnate answers. Ask more thoughtful questions that require a more thoughtful response, such as, “what was the best part of your day,” or “if you had a superpower, what would it be and why?”
- Try to make eye contact and say hello to every single person passed on the street.
- Give the barista, or check-out person undivided attention.
- Drive focused on the road and observe how many other people are on their phone.
- Put the phone away and just pet the dog (or cat) for 10 entire minutes (set the microwave timer). Even my dog gets irritated when I’m multi-tasking with him and my phone. He notices my focus, and he is a dog. Imagine what our own flesh and blood want, think, and feel. Consider giving them 10 minutes of eye contact, undivided attention, and engaging questions that move beyond transactional dialogue and into substance.

We all can do better at caring about and being kind to the people around us. A great start is by making a focused effort to disconnect from the phone to reconnect with the world.

— Riemann is president of 1492 Communications, a consulting firm. Like [1492 Communications](#) on Facebook to learn more.