

Emails, texts, social networking sites — they're all meant to keep us in touch. But the truth is they seem to be driving us apart

SOPHIE GOODCHILD



**H**AVE you ever emailed a colleague across the office or "diaried" time to phone a friend? If you work in London, the answer is most probably "yes". Twittering, emailing and texting are fast replacing socialising for time-poor Londoners who spend at least 1.5 hours online a day. But what is the real impact of replacing the human touch with Facebook and BlackBerrys?

According to psychologist Dr Aric Sigman we are all at risk of isolation if we rely too heavily on e-communication. His view is that using modern technology to maintain relationships could damage our health. The fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine says cyber-socialising could even alter the way our bodies work. Everyone needs the "cuddle" chemical oxytocin to combat depression and breed trust. And this is released only when we get up close to fellow human beings. Dr Sigman says: "Social networking sites should allow us to embellish our social lives but what we find is very different."

E-communication is also to blame for a rise in sleep disorders. London's Capio Nightingale Hospital reveals that professionals are seeking help to mentally "log-off" from their laptops.

Here our expert and four writers give their views on how emails, the web and BlackBerrys have changed our lives, for better or worse.

#### THE EXPERT SAYS

**Nerina Ramlakhan**, psychologist at London's Capio Nightingale hospital  
The image of Paris and Nicky Hilton on their BlackBerrys is a classic example of people not engaging. Getting a text message from a friend puts a smile on your face. You get energy from this. But it is transient and it is not the same as the energy you get from spoken words, sounds and eye contact.

I took my daughter to see a film at the weekend and there was a man in the front row with his children. Yet he was on his BlackBerry, not sharing the film experience with them. He was just ticking the box to say he was doing "the daddy thing".

My work is focused on looking at the link between mind and body. I had one client, a lawyer, whose relationship broke down because she was going to bed with her laptop and her BlackBerry. Her partner complained there was no longer any room for him in the relationship. Our working memory is like an inbox — it's only geared to take a certain amount of information. And it needs to go "off-line" from time to time.

#### NERINA'S STEPS TO END YOUR E-ISOLATION

- 1. Don't take your BlackBerry to bed**  
Our inability to go "off-line" is to blame for sleep problems. Many patients complain they cannot switch off when they go to bed. Our brains are like athletes. To go faster you have to build in rest.
- 2. Learn how to sit in silence**  
Always looking for the next source of stimulation is not good for our health. It destroys concentration and creates anxiety. Allowing your brain just to



Otherwise engaged: sisters Nicky and Paris Hilton studiously ignore each other at a New York fashion show

# Are you suffering from e-isolation?

LOST IN SPACE — FOUR WRITERS CONFESS THEIR CYBER SINS

"be" is one effective way to detox from constant e-communication.

#### 3. Write someone a letter

The left side of our brain is our rational, logical side; the right deals with emotions. Emails are left-brain communication. But letters are an outpouring of feelings, so they involve the brain's right side. It's important to use it.

#### 4. Join in a group activity

It's a basic human need to feel part of a tribe. Facebook is great for this on one level but it can also bring a sense of alienation. It doesn't bring the same long-term sense of connection that, say, going to a football match does.

#### ISOLATED FACTS

- **1.5 hours:** the average time we spend on the internet every day
- **216 million texts:** the number we send to each other daily
- **Two hours:** how long we spend communicating face-to-face
- **One in 10:** the number of Britons who feel their work suffers because of lack of face-to-face interaction
- **A quarter:** the proportion of British children with a laptop or computer in their room by the age of five



#### LIZ HOGGARD

Recently I met a man. We had coffee, then started emailing. And how we emailed. We virtually wrote a modern novel between us. Confessions about childhood poured out, our hopes, our dreams. And, yes, a bat squeak of desire started forming. Although we could hardly remember what each other looked like. Our emails got more daring. We even had a proper "couple" row. But then we met again — disaster! Fantasy on the page is one thing. But I do think you need face-to-face encounters, the challenges — and longueurs — of real life to know someone. We might well still write a film script together (if we can get over ourselves). But e-flirtations should come with a government health warning.



#### NICK CURTIS

This affects me most at work — I catch myself emailing people two desks away about the most banal things, through laziness. Otherwise, I'll use text

or email to set up evenings out or dinner rather than phone but at least this is an adjunct to human interaction rather than a substitute. (Some of my friends have a lackadaisical attitude to timekeeping, so it's good to have times and places written down.) My sister lives in Copenhagen and our occasional emails lack intimacy and are no match for weekly or fortnightly phone calls. And fortunately my parents are even more technophobic than me, so we will always talk rather than text or email.



#### CHARLOTTE ROSS

Facebook is my vice. I use it as a substitute for actually meeting people and maintaining friendships properly. Because you can spy on other people's lives, you get to see what they're up to without going to the bother of talking to them. I know, for instance, when Anna's been shoe shopping and a photo of two fluffy kittens told me Geraldine had expanded her household. Three friends announced they were pregnant this way and two have posted marriage plans on their profile page. Because of this quite intimate access, I kid



#### RICHARD GODWIN

PM mother, comment on sister's status, poke the wife. There's nothing unusual about engaging in these activities with friends, who tend to keep a similar pace with technology and are versed in its etiquettes. What's strange is how Facebook has taken over family life. My two sisters are currently on lengthy stays in Oceania, which prompted my mother to venture on to Facebook. It is true, it offers a quick line to the Antipodes. But I live only half an hour down the road and I too was invited to be her friend. Now I am subject to such comments as "You haven't written on Louisa's wall for a while now, Richard"; or "It's not nice to get so drunk". Sadly technology still forbids the sharing of a Sunday roast over the internet, so we are stuck with all the difficulties of family life with none of the consolations.

myself that I'm still in touch with a whole range of friends I haven't seen in years. Wouldn't it be so much better if I bought a train ticket and paid them a visit?