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Text Less - Live More

Dear Readers,

As the title denotes, I will discuss my point of view this week on texting and use of cell phones. The truth is that I had a strong urge to write about this topic for a long time but since I was asked to write a medical column, I felt that my readers should get “their money’s worth” of pure health tips. Now that I have come close to handing over almost all of my medical expertise to you, I want to write about a topic that will demonstrate to you, what has clearly become a medical problem.

My take on Technology

My 11th grade Rebbi – Rabbi Yosef Singer (now the Menahel of Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim in Kew Garden Hills) once mentioned in class that the technological advancements in those days (early 1990’s) became a social distraction and waste rather than moving us to a more efficient society. With the advent of the internet, the all popular “chat rooms” and multitude of online games and gambling the destructive powers of today’s technology are clearer than ever. The length of time is *saved* via the use of the internet pales to compare with time *lost* via the internet.

Today, nearly two decades later, we face an even greater challenge. Today’s threat comes from an object that is small, mobile and relatively inexpensive. It became a “life necessity”; very few people amongst us lack a personal cell phone. How did these small gadgets become so powerful? And why are they so dangerous?

The True Hazard

As some of you may have heard on the media, today’s orthopedic surgeons are inundated with a new challenge. They encounter cases of tendon damage in the hands and cysts that develop due to the overuse of text messaging. The young patients afflicted with these issues can often have *life long* fine motor deficits in their hands.

But in my opinion, there is a bigger danger that hides behind the scene. This problem is one that no surgeon could ever fix. The damage created by this hazard can change lives *forever*.

As a primary care physician, I am privileged to create a special bond with my patients. On occasion, I bitterly remarked to my office staff that some of the messages I receive should often be directed to a close relative. But then I smile and remind my office staff that the *same* message is a clear sign of our successful career in medicine. The sheer fact that a patient would feel comfortable with us shows that we accomplished our task.



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Being that most patients feel at ease with their primary care doctors, they tend to show their natural behavior at our office. I try and use this atmosphere to educate many parents and discuss with young adults my friendly advice. It has become almost a daily routine at my office that I enter an examination room, start obtaining medical history and right then, text message or a phone call arrives. To me, this is the most important test of the parental character. If a parent answers the phone call while I speak with them, they clearly fail that test. Yes, I understand that there are exceptions. I am not here to judge anyone, and on occasion, I overhear a clearly urgent call. But honestly, 90% of these phone calls are brief, and they either start or end with the parent stating "I can't talk to you right now – I'm at the doctor's office with my child".

On one occasion, I opened my office late at night to suture a 2 year old's chin. His father was holding his arms as I was injecting him with lidocaine. When the father's cell phone rang, he left his child's arms, picked up the phone and told his friend "Chaim, I can't speak to you right now, my son is getting stitches". Shocked as I was, I smiled at the father and asked him: isn't this why we have voicemails?

Time after time, parents show their kids that they can not stay focused. If it happens at my office, it clearly happens at home during dinner time, at the supermarket, in the car and dare I say in the shul? Time after time parents are prevented from bonding with their kids, from sharing good advice, from knowing what the kids did in school, and showing their kids how to pray. Roughly 50% of the parents will miss on these passing opportunities every day. Kids by nature learn from our actions. They are extremely receptive to their parents' actions. So if your child approaches you before high school and asks for a text enabled cell phone, you stand a *better* chance of saying "No" if your child does not see you "texting away".

Who is in control?

Here is another case. In the midst of me answering a mother's question, she picked up the phone and had a brief conversation. At the end of the visit, I had the audacity to ask why this mom felt compelled to answer her cell phone. She answered that since her child had food allergies she feels that every call should be answered for it maybe a teacher, relative or a friend trying to urgently alert her to the aid of her allergic child in case of an emergency.

At the first moment, I was remorseful. I sympathized with the mother and offered my heart felt wishes that her children should stay happy and healthy. But later, thinking about this specific case, I learned a great lesson. What this episode signaled to me was that because of the advent of the cell phone, this mom was now bound to this object. How could she ever enter a store with no reception? How could she enjoy a plane ride without access to a phone? What did she do on Shabbos when her child was away from home? On self examination, I was not sure if I could be a good father or a physician if on



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occasion I would learn in a yeshiva or dance at a wedding hall where there is good reception.

Then the answer hit me – what would happen if that child would have severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) g-d forbid? The nurse at the school should administer an Epi-Pen and call the ambulance. I'm sure that a competent nurse would not call on the mom to come and administer the shot or it may be too late!!! So why was this mother all nervous?

On a Friday night I related this story to my father in law on the way back from shul. He opened my eyes to a fascinating thought. People in our generation want to feel *in control*. Now, more then ever, we feel that because we live in a sophisticated, high-tech society, we could handle almost everything that comes our way. The cell phone in some scenarios allows us to continue living with this elusive, grandiose and precarious thought. We feel that by having constant access, we could solve problems, accomplish more then we could ever do and be “all that we could be”. When we do not have these gadgets – we are almost useless.

However, instead of *gaining* control, I think we are *losing* control.

We are losing control of our impulses. Whether it's a teenager acting on their teenage impulses, or a young parent acting on their impulses, we are losing control of our lives. We let a small gadget pull us away, even for a minute from our mates, our parents, our kids and our physicians. We and our kids can not enjoy and form those warm memories of birthday parties, Bar Mitzvahs or even precious wedding moments. We are losing our bond with our teenage kids, and putting them in unnecessary risk. Medical studies show that by using these gadgets we put our infants at risk of speech delay and well documented emotional instability.

My Message

At my office, I do not enter an exam room with my cell phone. When parents ask me how I could do such a thing, I calmly explain that in order to stay focused on their child, I can not afford to be interrupted by my family and friends. But when I arrive home, my first act is to put the phone away (Don't worry - I have configured it so that it will only ring when I get paged from my office). I often remind my kids how much I dislike this gadget.

By doing this, I hope that I am delivering the right message to my kids. The message is that my house is like my exam room – I reserve no right to interrupt my focus and my goal as a parent because of a non urgent text. Most importantly, my message is that in life I am *not* in control of everything that occurs. I merely try to do my best, and that is the simple and humble message I send to Hashem.

Wishing you a healthy and enjoyable winter,



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