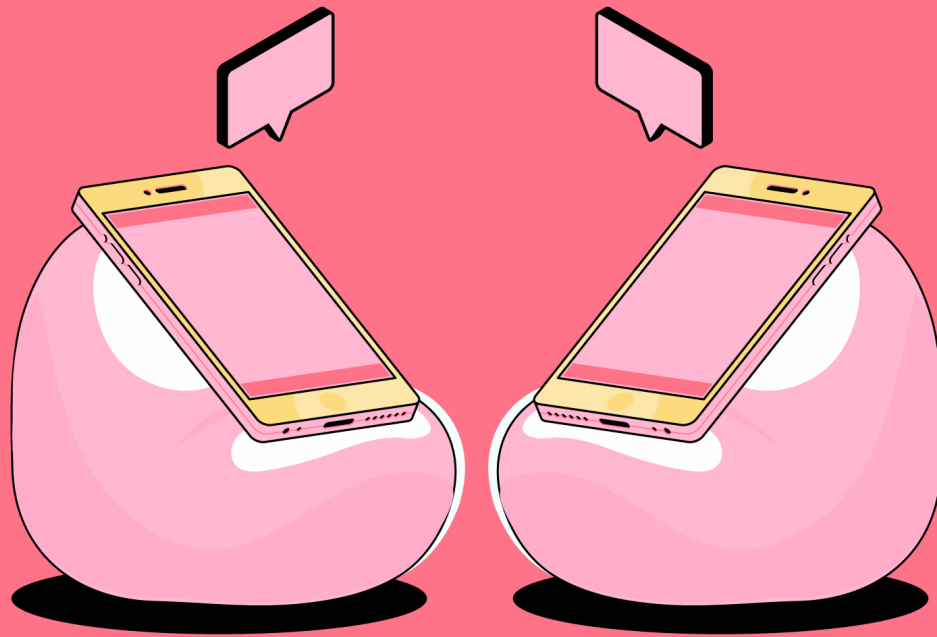


# SUMMARY

## RECLAIMING CONVERSATION

SHERRY TURKLE



# **Summary of “Reclaiming Conversation” by Sherry Turkle**

Written by Alyssa Burnette

The art of talking to each other in the age of Instant Messaging.

Introduction

5

Would You Rather?

6

Virtual Friends

8

Social Media Has Skewed Our Dating Standards Too

10

Final Summary

13



**DO YOU WANT THIS BOOK  
AS AN 20-MINUTE AUDIOBOOK?**



**Get the key insights of non-fiction books  
in minutes instead of hours. Listen to  
our free audiobooks while you workout  
or on your commute to work.**



**DOWNLOAD  
OUR FREE APP**



# Introduction

I recently saw a meme that read, “Sorry I didn’t answer your call-- I don’t use my phone for calls!” At the time, I laughed because this is certainly indicative of my own phone usage, but I was also reminded of the fact that this meme is a sobering commentary on our communication habits in the digital age. For example, I’m far more likely to text a friend instead of calling them, and I have frequently texted my mother while sitting right beside her on the couch. Surely, using my mouth to talk to her would be the easiest or most appropriate thing to do-- but it’s not necessarily my first instinct! I’m also guilty of many other obnoxious millennial habits like constantly taking selfies for Instagram or communicating with friends by showing them memes. But why do we do this? Why has this become more natural to us than face to face communication? The author argues that the digital age has permanently revolutionized our communication habits, both for better and for worse. And over the course of this summary, we’ll learn how we can develop our awareness of this issue and cultivate authentic connections with others.



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](http://QUICKREAD.COM/APP)

## Would You Rather?

When you were growing up, did your parents have a “no phones at the dinner table” rule? Do you try to institute a similar policy with yourself and your policy? If not, the author argues that you probably should! That’s because studies show that the presence of electronic devices can not only hinder conversation—they can also lower our empathy responses! That’s right—your phone can literally decrease your connection with the person you’re talking to. It might sound a little crazy, but here’s how it works. We stay digitally connected all the time. At any given moment, we can be reached by an email from work, a Facebook DM from a friend, or a notification from an unwanted spam email. And because we carry our phones around with us all the time, we’ve grown so accustomed to the constant barrage of blips and bleeps in our pockets that we don’t notice how it’s re-wired our brain. Because whether you act on the impulse or not, the presence of these constant notifications send signals to our brain that say, “You need to open that right now!” And if you suffer from a disorder like anxiety or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, those signals can be almost impossible to resist. They can even take on a sense of frantic urgency, flooding us with questions like, “What if it’s important? What if someone is mad at me? What if somebody unfollowed me?”

These signals can take on a life of their own, even if we’re not aware of them. So, if we have our phones out during a face to face conversation, our attention will always be divided. For example, we might be more likely to avoid engaging with deep topics because we know we’re likely to be interrupted at any moment. Under these circumstances, we simply don’t have the presence of mind to consider anything more than a surface topic. And on the flipside, the chaos of our busy-- and often over-digitized lives-- frequently results in a preference for electronic communication. For example, we might not have time to meet a friend for dinner, but we can call them while we’re driving, so we opt to do this instead. And if we make this superficial substitute for communication a habit, it’s tempting to feel

like it's doing the trick. As a result, we often feel as though we've "seen" or "talked" to our friends when we've merely FaceTimed or texted them.

But until the onset of a global pandemic, we haven't really been forced to consider these topics! Suddenly, when digital communication becomes our only way of connecting, it feels hollow and empty. We ache to meet our friends for a drink or give them a hug or tell them a story face to face.

Under these circumstances, we've come to realize that digital communication is a wonderful boon in that it keeps us connected. But we've also seen that it's not a true substitute for in-person interaction. So, the next time you're fortunate enough to meet up with a friend, consider a social experiment: turn your phone off and/or put it out of sight. And see if this simple action improves the quality of your conversation!



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](https://www.quickread.com/app)

# Virtual Friends

Just as social media has re-defined the rules of our communication, so it has altered our expectations for friendship. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the constant presence of incoming notifications has created the expectation that we should be connected to each other 24/7. And if we think we have it bad as adults, the author invites us to consider the pressure that young children are under. To test her theory, the author conducted interviews with teens and tweens to ask them about their digital communication habits. The results of her study conclusively proved that social media has literally rewired us to approach communication differently. For example, one high-school student reported that she felt more at ease while texting because it allowed her to present a carefully curated version of herself.

Freed from the pressure of talking and thinking on the fly, she could think for a moment before composing a text and ensure that she was comfortable with her reply. She also indicated that texting was comforting to her because she could be assured of an instant reply. However, other students confirmed that the expectation of instant replies can often generate more anxiety if someone takes too long to text you back or opens your message without replying. Similarly, other teens asserted that digital message indicators like “message read,” “message opened,” and “last online” can produce anxiety and cause you to worry that your friends are ignoring you or upset with you.

Of course, the flip side of this anxiety is that everyone is under monumental pressure to deliver instant replies. This offers little free time for engaging in the “real world” and this can cause distress as well. Some of the author’s younger participants-- many of whom were in middle school-- reported that they were so stressed about the urgency of replying to their friends that they often slept with their phones in their hands in case they received a notification. Likewise, kids are bombarded with the pressure to create and maintain a “brand” on social media. Gone are the days where it is enough to



simply have an Instagram and engage with others' content; this simplicity has been replaced by the pressure to put your entire life on display, to create aesthetically pleasing content, and present the prettiest version of yourself at all times. Is it any wonder kids are stressed these days?!

As you can see from these examples, the standards set by social media are drastically different from those necessitated by face to face communication. And they not only cause us more stress, they literally rewire our brains to reconfigure our expectations for friendships. The author cites a recent study from Holbrooke High School in New York City. To understand more about his students' values, the dean of the school had asked 60 students to tell him the qualities they valued most in a friend. An overwhelming majority reported that they wanted someone who made them happy or made them laugh. The dean wisely interpreted this as being a cry for release from the teens' mounting daily stress and he was proved right! By contrast, only three students cited values that they hoped a prospective friend would have, like kindness or reliability. This indicated to the dean that our teenagers are so stressed, they are willing to forego healthy friendships for the temporary relief of a little laughter.



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](https://www.quickread.com/app)

# Social Media Has Skewed Our Dating Standards Too

Have you ever used a dating app like Tinder? Statistics show that over 50 million people worldwide have used it at one time or another! And if you have any experience with dating apps, you've probably learned the hard way that appearances can be deceiving. We've all heard of catfishing and its notoriously disastrous results, but even when online dating doesn't prove life-threatening, it can still have some less than stellar side-effects. After all, we all know that it's easy to fall for someone's profile picture and text for hours, feeling as though you've developed a genuine connection with this person... only to meet in person and realize that their pictures have been photo-shopped beyond belief and in real life, they're nothing like they were on the internet.

The author asserts that online dating is problematic for a couple of reasons. For one thing, you don't always know who you're really dealing with. Whether you're being catfished or you've simply fallen for someone's airbrushed, Instagrammable "internet self," the romantic connections we forge online are too often fake. This unsurprisingly leads to disappointment as it fails to produce the lasting love we were hoping for. But internet dating can also be unhelpful because of the expectations it raises. For example, apps like Tinder lead us to believe that we have hundreds of potential love connections at our fingertips. As a result, we fall into the trap of thinking that there are plenty of fish in the sea and all of them are up for grabs. We might even start to incorporate this feeling into our sense of self-esteem by thinking, "Hundreds of people are interested in me! I should feel pretty great about myself!"

But unfortunately, before we know it, this plethora of choices can generate new problems. Where we once found satisfaction, we might now feel emptiness as we realize that there are indeed hundreds of people on the internet... and most of them will disappoint us. We may quickly tire of the shallow connections, the weirdos and creeps, and the same old hollow 'getting to know you' conversations that never lead anywhere meaningful.

This theory is more than just the author's opinion, however. In fact, multiple psychological studies-- including research conducted by esteemed psychologist Barry Schwartz-- has found that when our options are limited, we cherish our choices more. If we have too many, we metaphorically have just enough rope to hang ourselves; we can be overwhelmed and depressed by the amount of unfulfilling options!

But as if that's not enough, the author observes that online dating has also skewed our standards for romantic communication. In real life, we would never dream of simply ignoring someone or hitting them with a vicious comment as soon as we found them unpleasant, but online dating has normalized these practices. Because we're only communicating behind phone screens and we don't have to confront the reality of someone's pain in real life, we've grown comfortable with "ghosting" them or spewing venom from the comfort of our iPhones. "Ghosting" is a colloquial term for disappearing from someone's life by cutting off all communication without explanation. And although it can be done to a friend, partner, or family member, it's most commonly practiced in the world of online dating. For example, if you're no longer interested in someone or you don't want to talk to them, you might just ghost them instead of simply saying, "Hey, I don't think this is working out."

And although most people would think twice about ghosting someone in real life, many otherwise kindhearted people view it as being par for the course in the age of digital communication. However, the normalization of ghosting doesn't make it any less hurtful; if you've ever been on the receiving end of it, you know exactly how it feels! So, the next time you match with someone on Tinder or feel your interest in a match waning, take a moment to consider digital media's impact on your communication style. Ask yourself if online dating brings you true fulfillment. Or better yet, ask yourself if your online behavior reflects the choices you would make in real life. Do you find yourself becoming more flippant, more shallow, and less empathetic? Do you expect instant gratification and treat people as casual flings? Are you comfortable ghosting people online if you wouldn't in real

life? If you answer yes to any of these questions, it might be time to re-think your digital communication habits!



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](https://quickread.com/app)

## Final Summary

The invention of social media and digital communication has presented us with unparalleled possibilities for staying connected with one another. But unfortunately, our abundance of options often leaves us feeling more disconnected than ever. Although the stress inflicted by digital communication frequently lurks in our subconscious, the mounting pressure generated by the daily barrage of notifications can inhibit our interaction with others in the “real world” and even prevent us from living meaningful lives.

Digital communication is also responsible for an increase in stress, especially in teens, tweens, and young adults. And as kids struggle to cope with this influx of anxiety, they don’t realize that their standards for communication, dating, and friendship are being rewritten in their brains while they text. The author also observes that adults don’t fare much better. Although we think online dating and its plethora of matches will make us happy, the results are often far more unfulfilling and result in hurtful practices like ghosting that defy the standards of communication we would apply in face to face interaction.



GET THE FREE AUDIOBOOK IN OUR APP: [QUICKREAD.COM/APP](https://www.quickread.com/app)



**DO YOU WANT THIS BOOK  
AS AN 20-MINUTE AUDIOBOOK?**



**Get the key insights of non-fiction books  
in minutes instead of hours. Listen to  
our free audiobooks while you workout  
or on your commute to work.**



**DOWNLOAD  
OUR FREE APP**

