

SUMMARY

ALONE TOGETHER

SHERRY TURKLE



Summary of “Alone Together” by Sherry Turkle

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Why We Expect More from Technology and Less
from Each Other.

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Introduction

Technology is seductive. It takes us away from our real-life vulnerabilities and allows us to enter a world with the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Take a look at the advertising for Second Life, a virtual world that gives you the power to build an avatar, a house, a family, and a social life. Such a game is essentially saying, “Finally, a place to love your body, love your friends, and love your life.” On Second Life, people create avatars to represent themselves that are often richer, younger, thinner, and trendier than their real-life selves. But our online lives do much more than allowing us to create a seductive world to escape our own, technology also allows us to stay in touch with one another while simultaneously hiding from each other. For instance, we can text instead of talk. In fact, we find talking in person or over the phone intrusive, so we prefer to send a quick text message, even when that person is in the same house!

In past books, author Sherry Turkle explored how personal computers have changed our ways of thinking about ourselves, our relationships, and our sense of being human. Additionally, she discussed how people saw computers and how they allowed people to forge new identities in online spaces. Throughout *Alone Together*, Turkle shows how technology has taken these to a new level. Follow along as Turkle explains the social repercussions of technology and how the more advanced we get, the less connected we become.

When Inanimate Objects Ask That We Care For Them, We Encounter an Ethical Dilemma

As the world becomes more advanced, we begin to explore our relationships with robots. No longer are robots simply machines that cannot think or feel. Today, computers have become intelligent machines that still can't feel, but can certainly *think*. As a result, our relationships with robots have changed drastically over the years. In fact, when those machines start asking us to care for them, the definition of animate and inanimate objects begins to merge together.

In the late 1990s, the Tamagotchi became a widely popular digital toy. It was a virtual creature housed in a plastic egg and needed constant care to grow from a child into an adult. It needed to be fed, amused and cleaned up, and if a child failed to care for their Tamagotchi, it died. Suddenly, children became caretakers and the toy taught them that digital life can be emotional, and filled with both obligations and regrets. One eight-year-old stated, "I hate it when my Tamagotchi has the poop all around. I am like its mother. That is my job. I don't like it really, but it gets sick if you leave it messy." Another commented on her relationship to her "deceased" Tamagotchi and stated, "She was loved; she loved back."

As humans begin to care for a digital creature, they begin to build a connection. For instance, when a Tamagotchi died, you could simply hit the reset button for a new one to appear. However, many children believe that it's different, that the reset button is like cheating, "Your Tamagotchi is really dead... They say you get it back, but it's not the same one. It hasn't had the same things happen to it." It's like an imposter and they don't feel an attachment with the new one as they did with the previous one. To children, those Tamagotchis were *alive enough*.

One researcher even tested just how much humans become attached to digital creatures. She aimed to discover under what conditions a creature is deemed alive enough for people to experience an ethical dilemma if the creature is distressed. In the test, a person was asked to invert three creatures: a Barbie doll, a Furby (a furry, owl-like robot), and a live gerbil. The test aimed to answer the question, “How long can you hold the object upside down before your emotions make you turn it back?”

When it came to Barbie, people were willingly carrying the Barbie by her feet and slinging her by her hair, they had no problem handling the Barbie in an aggressive manner. The gerbil, of course, was held carefully and no one dared turn it upside down. But the case of the Furby proved interesting. People would hold it upside down for thirty seconds or so, but when the Furby would start crying and saying “I’m scared,” people would feel guilty and turn it back upright. Ultimately, when robots feel or act real, we experience an ethical dilemma when we are asked to put them in distress.

Robots Can Be Used to Cure Loneliness But Harmful When They Malfunction

As we mentioned in the previous chapter, as robots become more human-like, we will become more attached to them. This is why many nurses and physicians bring sociable robots, like My Real Baby, into nursing homes. Nursing homes, in particular, use robots as a cure for loneliness. When the elderly lose a spouse, they often become lonely, and that loneliness makes people sick. Caretakers have said that robots address the troubles of old age by providing “comfort, entertainment, and distraction.”

For example, Andy, a 76-year-old living in a nursing home, was given a baby robot called My Real Baby to help him cope with his loneliness. He craves company but finds it hard to make friends at the nursing home, his children no longer visit him, and he misses his ex-wife the most. When he first saw his My Real Baby, he said, “Now I have something to do when I have nothing to do.” Soon the robot doll became a companion to Andy. He began to interact with the baby doll as if it were alive, even naming it after his ex-wife. He used it to remember times with her and had conversations with her that, because of their divorce, he was never able to have.

For Andy, My Real Baby became a way to cope with his divorce and provided an outlet for him to speak about his feelings and how he was struggling. The robot provided great psychological relief for Andy, and it became easier for him to bond with the robot versus real people. For the elderly, especially, a relationship with a robot can become a cathartic experience and help them cope with the troubles that come along with getting older. For children, however, attachments to robots can have hurtful consequences when they break or malfunction.

In one study, children from all walks of life interacted with robots, one of them named Kismet. Kismet is a human-like robot designed to simulate a toddler’s emotions. Kismet has large doll eyes, eyelashes, and red rubber tubing lips. It speaks in a soft babble that mimics the inflections of human

speech and can repeat requested words, like its own name or the name of the person talking to it. However, Kismet was often “buggy” and suffered glitches while children interacted with it. One girl, Estelle, was playing with Kismet when it suffered a glitch, but Estelle believed she had done something wrong to make Kismet malfunction.

For twelve-year-old Estelle, going to MIT to play with robots was special. It made her the first in her family to walk into a college and she made sure to look her best. So when Kismet malfunctioned, Estelle became sullen and withdrawn. She began to eat and didn't stop until researchers finally asked her to leave some of the food for the other children. She took Kismet's malfunctions personally and proved that when children become attached to robots, they quickly feel hurt when something goes wrong.

Robots Can Become Caring Computers

As people grow connections with lifelike robots, and as they become more advanced, they soon might even be able to take the role of caretakers. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, robots can become a great way for the elderly to no longer feel lonely. But can they do more than cure our loneliness? Well, Japan believes that robots as caretakers will one day become a necessity. 25 years ago, Japanese demographers discovered that Japan wouldn't have enough young people to take care of the elderly in the future. So they began developing a robot named Wandakun to help.

Developed in the late 1990s, Wandakun became a fuzzy koala that responded when being petted by purring, singing, and speaking a few phrases. One 74-year-old in a nursing home became attached to this "creature" stating, "When I looked into his large brown eyes, I fell in love after years of being quite lonely... I swore to protect and care for the little animal." So what are the benefits to a robot caretaker besides helping with loneliness? Many robot caretaker enthusiasts argue that robots will be more patient with the cranky and forgetful elderly than a human could ever be. So not only will they be better than nothing, they will simply be better.

In a 2005 symposium titled "Caring Machines: Artificial Intelligence in Eldercare," experts discussed the possibility of using technology to solve the lack of caretakers problem. For many in attendance, *caring* meant that machines would *take* care of the elderly, not that they would *care* about the elderly. For them, caring was a behavior and not a feeling. One physician stated, "Like a machine that cuts your toenails. Or bathes you. That is a *caring computer*." Many argue that a person taking care of someone is the same as a robot, as long as they are being cared for, that should be enough. For example, Miriam, a seventy-two-year-old woman found comfort in her seal-like robot, Paro. Miriam would confide in Paro and share secrets even though Paro truly didn't care about her. Ultimately, the nursing staff and the scientists who created Paro don't perceive this lack of care to be a problem.

Our Attachments to Robots Could Replace Real Relationships

As humans continue to interact with human-like robots, we begin to form connections. But are these connections always a positive one? Let's take a look at Edna, an eighty-two-year-old who lives alone. Every two weeks her granddaughter Gail comes to visit with her two-year-old daughter, Amy. Amy enjoys visiting Edna because she loves the attention she gets and feels spoiled. One day, however, author Sherry Turkle and her research team brought along a My Real Baby for a play-date.

This particular morning Edna is focused on Amy, she hugs her, talks to her, and gives her snacks. After about half an hour, Edna is introduced to My Real Baby and her attention begins to shift. As she plays with the baby robot, her face lights up when she sees the baby smile back at her. She speaks to the robot, saying "Hello, how are you? Are you being a good girl?" She then cares for the robot when it cries by feeding her and, eventually, her attention completely shifts from Amy to the "baby." When Amy offers Edna a cookie, Edna tells her to lower her voice so that she doesn't wake the baby. Amy then whines that *she* is hungry; however, Edna doesn't listen because she is too busy with My Real Baby.

The case of Edna illustrates the worst fears of family members who worry that their parents and grandparents may prefer the company of robots. Many experts worry that children and teenagers may also prefer robot companionship since they already prefer texting over talking. But what about adults who prefer robots? Sixty-four-year-old Wesley is one such adult. He has been divorced three times and has come to see his self-centeredness as a troublesome problem. He finds relationships with *real* women are too much pressure, so he wonders if a robot would allow him the companionship with fewer needs.

Well, in January of 2010, Wesley's perfect woman was on the market: Roxxy, the "world's first sex robot." Roxxy cannot move, but she has

electronically warmed skin and internal organs that pulse. She even makes conversation and senses when she is being touched. For example, when she senses her hand is being held, she will say, “I love holding hands with you,” and can move to a more erotic conversation as the physical caresses become more intimate. Her personality can be chosen as well, ranging from wild to frigid. Sex robots like Roxxy may have been intended to be “better than nothing,” similar to that of robot caretakers, but for people like Wesley, Roxxy may be better than a real woman.

Online Profiles Lead to Stress Among Teens

In today's world, high school and college students are always texting - while they are eating, waiting for the bus, walking to class, waiting in line, etc. These students are constantly connected, yet they still experience crippling loneliness. For instance, a college sophomore named Leo is far from home. He spends all day talking or texting on his phone, yet he is still lonely. To curb the loneliness, he calls or texts his mom up to twenty times a day. Of course, this isn't anything abnormal, many adolescents engage in the same behavior. But why?

Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson has said that adolescents need a "time out." In other words, they need a consequence-free space for experimentation, they need time to create and build their identity. Experimenting with who they are is an important part of adolescence, and today, there are many opportunities for them to experiment through the use of technology. For instance, in a game like The Sims Online, you can create an avatar that expresses aspects of yourself, build a house, and even furnish it to your taste. You can then rework the virtual aspects of life that may not have so well in reality.

Katherine, a sexually experienced sixteen-year-old girl creates an innocent avatar, stating "I want to have a rest." Even more, she can practice being a different kind of person. She feels comforted by her virtual life and even thinks about breaking up with her boyfriend because she doesn't want to have sex anymore. Her character on The Sims has boyfriends but doesn't have sex, and she realizes she wants a fresh start. While Katherine understands that her character online is just that, she still sees The Sims Online as a place where she can start her life anew.

Experimenting with identity online doesn't always mean creating an avatar and immersing yourself into an online world, it can also take place on social networking sites. Instead of creating an avatar, you create a profile. For example, Mona, a freshman in high school, recently joined Facebook, and

immediately felt the power to create the *real* her. Yet, when she sat down to write her profile, she worried that her social life wasn't interesting enough. Another high schooler, Helen, always worries about who she accepts as friends on Facebook. She always feels a bit of panic, stating, "I really want to only have my cool friends listed, but I'm nice to a lot of other kids at school. So I include the more unpopular ones, but then I'm unhappy." She worries about friending kids she doesn't want to be seen with.

But the worry doesn't stop there. When trying to create an attractive Facebook profile, girls will often use "shrinking" software to appear thinner on their profile photographs. Boys, on the other hand, worry about how "cool" they appear. Brad, for example, an eighteen-year-old, hesitates to show his true interests, like Harry Potter, because he feels that will hinder his "Mr. Cool" persona online. He also feels the pressure to perform all the time because of who he is on Facebook. In the end, adolescents of all genders agree that building an online profile is stressful as they are opening themselves up to more and more judgment and scrutiny.

Talking on the Phone is Becoming Less Common Among Teens and Adults

Seventeen-year-old Elaine says, “So many people hate the telephone, it’s all texting and messaging.” She herself writes each of her six closest friends roughly twenty texts a day. And when she’s on the computer, “there are about forty instant messages out, forty in.” She goes on to say, “It’s only on the screen that shy people open up. When you can think about what you’re going to say, you can talk to someone you’d have trouble talking to.” The idea that hiding makes it easier to open up, however, is not new. Experts have long known that people are more likely to speak what’s on their mind when they feel protected from view.

So while teenagers are fleeing the telephone, perhaps more surprising is that adults are too. In the past, the telephone was a way to touch base or ask a simple question. Now, we have access to e-mail, instant messaging, and texting, which has changed everything. Today, we still use the telephone to keep up with others but now we believe that a phone call is too demanding. For example, Randolph is a forty-six-year-old architect with two jobs and three children and avoids the telephone because he feels “tapped out.” Now that e-mail is available, people expect a call will be more complicated, they expect it to take time, or else you wouldn’t have called.

Similarly, fifty-five-year-old Tara is a lawyer who juggles children, a stressful job, and a new marriage also avoids the telephone. She believes that people say to themselves, “It’s urgent or she would have sent an e-mail.” Fifty-seven-year-old Leonora is a chemistry professor who uses e-mail to make appointments to see friends. She’s so busy that oftentimes she makes an appointment with a friend one or two months in advance. And after everything is set up, they don’t call each other. Ever. Even worse, she feels as if she has “taken care of that person.” In other words, she has crossed them off a to-do list. But in today’s fast-paced world, the need for efficiency is crucial to get everything done.

Yet as we continue to text and e-mail one another, we also find ourselves constantly connected. We are always on, always at work, and always on call. There was once a time when physicians only had beepers, each one sharing the “burden” of taking the beeper home and being on-call. Today, we have all taken that burden, or simply reframed it as an asset. When Hope, a forty-seven-year-old real estate broker, goes on her morning hikes, she brings her BlackBerry to stay connected with her husband, who calls about every thirty minutes to stay in touch. She calls until she runs out of service, immediately feeling relief when that moment comes.

Hope, like many others, finds the constant connectivity to be stressful. With technology, we’ve all picked up the burden of being connected, yet sometimes people wish they had that burden during tragic times, like 9/11. Julia, for instance, remembers her teachers bustling students into the basement. Frightened, she and her classmates had no way to contact their parents. She was in the fourth grade and wished she had a way to talk to her mother. In the shadow of 9/11, cell phones have become a symbol of physical and emotional safety. For Julia, it was “always good” to have your cell phone with you.

Exploring Online Identities Can be Both Freeing for Some but Detrimental for Others

Similar to how teenagers need to experiment with their identity, adults sometimes need to experiment online to cope with the struggles of everyday life. When we go online, we are free to explore identity in places outside of our normal life routines. While this can be something as simple as a shy person exploring an outgoing life, this experience can become life-changing and freeing for others.

For instance, one young man “came out” online and witnessed the experience as practice for coming out to his friend and his family. Another woman lost her leg in a car crash and now wore a prosthetic limb. She felt anxious about resuming a sexual life after the accident, so she created an online avatar with a prosthetic leg and initiated virtual relationships. Online, she practiced talking about her prosthetic limb and even took it off before becoming intimate with virtual lovers. Soon, she grew more comfortable with her physical body and learned to accept it.

While virtual relationships have the opportunity to be life-changing for some, they don’t always offer positive experiences. Take a look at forty-three-year-old Adam who plays simulation games for up to fifteen hours at a time. As an aspiring singer and songwriter, Adam has two jobs to pay the bills but neither is particularly engaging, and his addiction to simulation games is causing him to barely hold on to them. He gets little sleep, but he doesn’t believe cutting back on his games to be an option. They are essential to his self-esteem and he feels relaxed and happy inside his simulation worlds.

Adam has become so consumed by his online world that he has neglected the rest of the world. His job, his hopes of singing and writing songs, none of these can compete with his favorite simulations, which he describes as familiar and comforting. They are places he feels “special,” and they allow him to forget about his sense of disappointment with himself. Furthermore,

when Adam plays his simulation games, he enters into what psychologist Mihaly Csíkszentmihalyi calls “flow,” the mental state in which a person is fully immersed in an activity with focus and involvement. In the flow state, you have clear expectations and attainable goals, and as you concentrate on a limited field, your anxiety begins to dissipate and you feel fully present.

In the flow state, we act without self-consciousness, an act that we crave. In today’s overstimulated world, we seek out constrained ones, similar to experiences you have at a Las Vegas gambling machine or on a ski slope. Now, you can have these same experiences playing games like World of Warcraft, Rock Band, and even when texting, e-mailing, and scrolling Facebook. So to escape the overstimulation and overwhelming world in real life, we flee to machines where the goal is to simply *be*. And as we’ve seen through Adam’s story, our online worlds can become comforting yet distract us from our role in the real world.

Final Summary

Technology can have many benefits. Not only can we be constantly connected with our friends and family but we can also use technology to cure our loneliness. Even more, technology can help people who are struggling to cope with real-life and give them the strength to make the necessary changes. However, as we create robots and other new technologies, they begin to replace our relationships as we form human-like connections with them. Even worse, we are constantly connected to work, family, and friends, which causes us more stress and anxiety. This is why many people are beginning to turn away from technology in favor of being less connected. Perhaps if we try to reconnect on a human level, we can begin to form better human connections instead of relying on technology to make connections for us.



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