

Can the Internet Replace Physical Contact?

As human beings, we were designed to communicate with one another. We were created with the tendency to express our ideas and feelings that help us understand the emotions and thoughts of each other. It has become apparent to us that the rise of online social interaction has had many questioned on whether or not the internet will replace our face-to-face normalcy, and remove the need of meeting people in the real world. The internet is unable to act as a replacement to our nature, as it does not possess the necessity that direct communication provides.

Firstly, the internet provides us an opportunity to communicate virtually in circumstances which we might not be able to meet physically. For example, circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic, where the world had to work, study, and do most of its affairs at home. But, the internet can only do so much as staying indoors puts a lot of pressure on the body as well as the mind. According to the National Academies of Sciences, social isolation significantly increased risk of premature mortality, including a 50% increased risk of developing dementia which is the loss of cognitive functioning - thinking, remembering, and reasoning. Secondly, there are crucial differences between online and face-to-face socializing which can lead to online communication being less emotionally satisfying and fulfilling than direct interaction. Whoever communicates mostly through the internet is entitled to gain dissatisfaction with conversing with friends and loved ones. When the world was in lockdown, I still spoke to friends and family through voice and even video calls daily. As much as I kept contact with my loved ones, my mental health was not as strong as it was before the pandemic, but when the world started opening up again, I actually felt substantially more connected to my classmates that I never met in real life.

Furthermore, although a virtual social life can make connectivity more seamless and straightforward, it lacks the physical contact that in-person interaction provides. For many people, the contact experienced in face-to-face interconnection cannot be replaced. For example, the feeling of stress or anxiety can lead to people feeling left out, and a further lack of person-to-person contact can lead to more loneliness. Moreover, the lack of physical connectivity can be poisonous to one's mental self; it is the displays of affection such as hugs that elevate the importance of face-to-face interaction as they provide an instant surge of Oxytocin (the "love hormone") levels, which are proven to decrease levels of depression and anxiety. In addition to this, Oxytocin is a neurotransmitter that acts on the brain, promoting feelings of love, trust, and social bonding. Finally, another neurotransmitter that attributes to

physical interaction is Serotonin, which is a regulation hormone, meaning it regulates anxiety, reduces depression, and makes you more focused.

On the other hand, there are those who argue that the internet will replace our natural means of communication. This is refuted by mentioning the amount of neurotransmitters that are released during direct contact, and like vaccines, they shield you in the present, and future. Simply making eye contact, shaking hands, and even giving someone a high-five is enough to release oxytocin, which as mentioned above increases your levels of trust, and lowers your cortisol levels, which lowers your stress. When you're only meeting with people online, it's nearly impossible to understand them in the same way you would in person. Social cues like body language are lost, and you're more likely to get distracted by a tab you have open on your computer. Psychologist Susan Pinker says "There's a huge difference between interacting in-person and interacting online. You don't get the same kind of flood of neurochemicals. It doesn't feel as good..."

In summary, the internet cannot replace our natural way of communicating as it is deficient in what talking to someone directly provides. Social isolation increases the chances of physical and mental diseases, and even mortality. Frequent online interaction leads to displeasure with talking to friends and loved ones; personally, I spent a long time contacting my friends and family through the internet, and I did experience deficiency in my mental health. When the world opened again, I felt more connected to those I met online when I met them physically. Online communication is absent of displays of affection such as hugs, which provide an instant rush of multiple hormones that decrease levels of depression, and allow you to be more focused. Those who argue that direct interconnection is replaceable are disproved by mentioning the abundance of neurotransmitters released during physical contact which decrease stress. It is very difficult, if not, impossible to fully understand someone through virtual communication, because of the absence of social cues. Finally, it is important for all of us to not isolate ourselves, to leave our homes, connect with others in the real world, and not depend on the internet as the new 'replacement' to our normal.