

How texting makes stress worse

If group chats give us solace and connection in a crisis, why do some of us feel burnt out and overwhelmed by them?

When lockdown first started in March, group chats were my lifeline. Text conversations with work friends, New York City friends, old friends and relatives helped me stay connected during the once-in-a-generation crisis. We laughed at memes, calmed each other down, checked in on each other's families.

But as the pandemic went on, I found group chats made my stress worse, not better. My phone was already constantly lighting up with news notifications, and the 50 or 60 missed texts that I could get in an hour from any one group chat made me feel anxious about putting it down. I felt guilty for not responding to a text right away, or checking in on a group thread. I couldn't exactly come up with a good excuse, either – what was I going to say: "Sorry I missed your message, I was too busy staying at home doing nothing for the eighth consecutive month"?

Group threads **have always caused some people anxiety**, even before the pandemic. But as someone who embraced them before the pandemic, it's surprising to discover that in the age of social distancing, it's possible to suffer from social overload. If they give us solace and connection in a crisis, why do some of us feel burnt out and overwhelmed by them?

'Communication debt'

Lockdown has meant that many more of us are using messaging apps. Text messages are casual, immediate and research shows that we **like them more than emails**. By late March, for example, WhatsApp **had already reported a 40% spike** in the number of users. **A study in September** of more than 1,300 US adults showed that use of digital communications of all kinds increased during Covid, with text messaging leading with a 43% jump.

If just the sight of notifications stress you out, you're not alone (Credit: Alamy)

We're lucky to have that kind of technology; without Zoom, Slack and WhatsApp, the pandemic would be a far lonelier experience. But group chat platforms come with an immediacy and intimacy that can make participating in them feel stressful.

"One reason they stress us out is the built-in urge to read a text in real time – and the parallel expectation in online culture that you will also respond in real time," says Elias Aboujaoude, a psychiatrist at Stanford University in California who specialises in the intersection of technology and psychology. Not responding right away makes us anxious; it gives us a "sense of having fallen behind and broken a major rule of online communications".

What's more, when you fall behind in a group chat, a backlog of missed messages can quickly pile up. Then, before you know it, **texting starts to feel as cumbersome as drudging through work email**. It makes for a "dreaded communication debt that we can now accrue by having asynchronous messages", says Bernie Hogan, senior research fellow at the University of Oxford's Internet Institute.

Before the pandemic, we could use the excuse of our busy lives to explain away missing a message or an entire conversation. If you felt tired and didn't want to socialise, you could just say so. But since options for social activity have been so curtailed, group chats have come to play a bigger role in many of our lives. We feel we should prize these interactions, yet they're coming at a much faster pace and higher volume than we're used to.

One reason they stress us out is the built-in urge to read a text in real time – Elias Aboujaoude

While we could still manage, pre-Covid, to interrupt what we were doing and engage in this read-and-respond-in-real-time ritual, it has become all but impossible to continue doing so with the magnitude and frequency of interruptions today," says Aboujaoude.

'Pavlovian response' of anxiety

But it's not just group chats – it's the technology itself. We already knew that being glued to our phones and computers **was bad for our health**. Depending on technology for all of our social communication needs can add to our cognitive load – something already **under increased pressure** in the pandemic.

"Each [group chat] conversation might have its own emotional register. Switching between these has a psychological 'switching cost' both intellectually and mentally," says Hogan, especially as we also jump among messaging platforms. (Personally, I have at least one group chat each in Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Signal and plain old SMS.)

Then there's the fact that some of us are experiencing burnout from all the demoralising pandemic news. Although early on we may have welcomed the articles that our friends shared as we strove to understand the impacts of Covid-19, we subsequently began to **dread the stream of anxiety-fuelling updates**.

It's possible to simply turn off your phone and stick it in a drawer for a bit – you don't have to text back right way

"Early into the pandemic, group chats may have felt like a good way to commiserate with many people simultaneously. You could count on everyone in the group having this stressful experience in common with you," says Aboujaoude. "The problem, it soon became clear, is that the stress and anxiety that sometimes come with one-on-one texting is magnified exponentially in group chats."

And there's also the issue of notifications that accompany each text or breaking news update – so even if the group chat is sending GIFs of monkeys back and forth, we still get anxious in this environment every time our phone vibrates or lights up.

"Even if you have the ability to distinguish the different beeps and alerts, at this point, it's almost like a Pavlovian response, where it's just that beep that sets off that anxiety," says Vaile Wright, senior director of health care innovation at the American Psychological Association. "It means something terrible has happened, even if it's not [terrible]."

Opting out

Of course, your tolerance for group chatting will depend on what else you're juggling; Wright points out that not everyone is experiencing the same levels of stress.

"Your great aunt may be retired, lives alone and finds that the group chat is really her only outlet to connect, while your college friends may be juggling working from home and Zoom fatigue, and trying to manage children at home e-learning, and may just feel like they don't have the bandwidth to maintain the group chat," she says. "The level of fatigue I think a lot of people are experiencing may just make it not practical to engage in the group chat."

You actually don't need to have an excuse for not texting somebody right away – Vaile Wright

If you are feeling overloaded by your group chat commitment, experts say there are ways to combine appreciating these important connections with periods in which you disengage.

"You actually don't need to have an excuse for not texting somebody right away. It's okay," says Wright, adding we should do things within our control to safeguard our mental wellbeing. She recommends turning off notifications, muting threads or excusing yourself from a group chat for a while. She says some people's feelings might get hurt, but setting boundaries is crucial. Explain it's something you need, rather than just ghosting people, or say something like: "I can't respond to this text, but the next time we're doing a call, make sure you include me."

Aboujaoude points out that being burnt out on group chats is a good reason to rediscover phone calls, "where more in depth, less distracted communicating can still take place". Wright concurs, saying: "Group chats are great for quick updates or sharing funny memes, but [the medium] doesn't really lend itself to sharing important aspects of our lives, providing emotional support, sharing a laugh or a good cry. Phone calls provide more opportunities to really connect on an emotional level."

Indeed, **research has shown that voice-to-voice communication** – as opposed to visual communication only, like texting – increases your ‘empathetic accuracy’ and your ability to tune into the other person’s emotions, allowing for a deeper connection.

So, if you really want to talk, perhaps pick up the phone. And if you need to tell your friends you’re muting the group chat, chances are, they’ll understand. “A solid relationship will withstand digital separation,” says Aboujaoude.

[Vocabulary list \(B\)](#)
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<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210129-how-texting-makes-stress-worse>