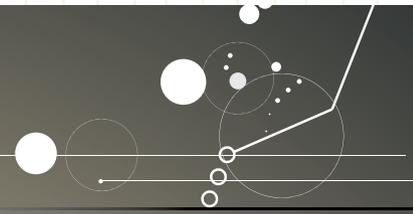




cyber chat



By Dr. Barbara Spears

Welcome to Cyber Chat #5. As I write this, I am holidaying in the south of France, in a little farm house, outside a tiny village in the Vaucluse region of Provence, and I am totally cut off from any online communication. The journey here has reminded me of the dependence we have not only on technology itself, but on the culture which surrounds it: the culture of needing to connect online.

As I settled into my plane seat for the thirty plus hours of travel I was embarking upon, I reached for the movie page in the on-flight magazine. I then planned my trip around which movie I wanted to watch, when I would watch it and when I would do some work on my computer. In the wee hours when one cannot sleep, I was able to prepare my presentation for the international meeting on cyberbullying I would eventually get to in Italy later in the month. The need to have everything done before I left was no longer an issue, as I could work on the plane and, I thought, stay connected to others via the ubiquitous Internet café. Little did I know that whilst the beautiful villages of southern France have fabulous food, markets and people, Internet cafés have not yet penetrated most, if any, of them and I would effectively be cut off.

What it highlights for me is the shift in culture we have had from previous generations, where we expect to be able to work in a connected sense, anywhere and anytime, with the consequences being an expectation of immediate gratification (connecting and communicating), and subsequent frustration when we cannot. How this is impacting on our health and wellbeing is worthy of reflection: do we only truly relax when we know we cannot log on? And how long does it take us to get the point that we lose the drive to be connected? As I watch my friends travelling with me contact their families

via text messaging; as we navigate our way through tiny streets in quaint villages using GPS (global positioning system) technology; as I turn on my computer early in the morning so that my day is free later to explore the countryside, I cannot help but realise that we cannot seem to relax without technology.

The Internet and online environment is no longer something that we add on: it is another system in which we operate, and one which reciprocally influences us and the contexts in which we exist and work: it acts upon us and our relationships and, therefore, impacts upon our behaviour, our mental health and our wellbeing. Understanding this for ourselves means that we should not have difficulty understanding the importance of the online environment for our young people, and the difficulty that they have in separating the online and offline social environments in which they operate.

Young people only know a world where relationships are conducted online. Relationships are hard enough without this added layer of complexity for young people to deal with. Our job, as adults, is to recognise that we can assist them to navigate their way through adolescent relationships in an online world, by teaching them the communication and empathic skills we know that they need to be successful, but at the same time, to also recognise that we need to develop online strategies which support them, when the technology 'system' in which they are operating gets in the way.

My presentation that I will be giving in Italy concerns Australian strategies to promote positive uses of communication technologies to challenge cyberbullying. There is much that is being done to support young people in this country (see below), but what is of most importance is recognising that technology has a role

as a system which reciprocally influences young people, their attitudes and their behaviours, and that we need to be using it as the setting to produce and model developmentally appropriate, youth-led solutions, to promote safe practices, ethical digital citizenship and, above all else, strong and supportive relationships and effective life skills.

As I now go and search for an elusive Internet café in a larger town to send this to the magazine, I am beginning to relax, safe in the knowledge that technology is helping me to do so, simply because I can connect when and where I need to.

Sites which promote positive support for young people:

Cyber(smart:) <http://www.cybersmart.gov.au>

The Line <http://www.theline.gov.au/>
NetAlert <http://www.netalert.gov.au/>

Stay Smart Online <http://www.staysmartonline.gov.au>

Bullying. No Way! <http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au/>

HeadSpace <http://www.headspace.org.au/home/information/health-and-wellbeing-/cyber-bullying/>

Kids Helpline <http://www.kidshelp.com.au/teens/get-info/hot-topics/cyber-bullying.php>

National Centre Against Bullying <http://www.ncab.org.au/>

Reach Out <http://au.reachout.com/find/issues/Safety-violence/bullying>

S-Press <http://www.spress.com.au/> 

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