

mtvU AP 2010 Technology and Mental Health Poll

Executive Summary



KEY FINDINGS:

For today's college students, constant digital communication carries an additional layer of complexity, often leading to misunderstandings, confusion and uncertainty.

- 85% of students say they feel compelled to immediately answer a new message on their cell phone at least half the time.
- If someone has not responded immediately to a text they have sent, nearly 6 in 10 report spending time analyzing the meaning of non-response.
- 61% of students say they have found themselves frequently tracking someone's social networking site.
- For 48% of students, at least half the time they read emails, text messages or posts on social networking sites, they are unsure about whether the sender was serious or joking

Most college students (79%) turn to their friends when in need of support. Nearly 7 in 10 college students report having read a post from someone close to them that made them think the person was calling out for emotional help.

- In response to such posts, just over half of students (54%) state that they are extremely or very likely to call that person to express their concern.
- 49% say they would reply to the message privately using social networking tools, while 4 in 10 (42%) would pay a personal visit to their friend.
- About a quarter say they would post a public message in response, and few would go the formal route and reach out to campus officials (10%) or a national help line (6%).

While most students (85%) say social networking sites make them feel more connected, 14% of students report that social networking sites increase feelings of isolation.

- About four in 10 students have at least 500 friends on social networking sites, though few interact often with many of them.

- 51% of students say they talk to very few of their friends on the phone weekly.
- Just 11% say they feel comfortable reaching out to most of their Facebook or MySpace friends during a difficult time or sharing very personal details of their lives with most of their online friends.
- Three-quarters say being popular has nothing to do with having large numbers of online friends.
- While 46% of students say they talk to their parents once a day or more, almost none use social networking sites to communicate with parents.

When it comes to communicating, in-person is preferred but not always practiced.

- Students recognize the value of in-person conversation, for both mundane activities like making plans with friends (84%), as well as for more serious communication like giving support to a friend with a personal problem (85%).
- While an overwhelming number of students say it is better to resolve personal conflicts with friends face to face (84%), that is not always how things seem to work out. 69% say they have had arguments exclusively using text messages, while about half admit to using technology at least moderately to avoid in-person confrontations.

Texting carries a high level of intimacy.

- The speed and ease of texting makes it the popular and preferred way among students to make plans with their friends (87% very likely/likely).
- When it comes to more serious communication, texting is second only to in-person in terms of students' likelihood to use it for providing support to friends (52%).
- Nearly 4 in 10 students report they are likely to ask for help with a serious personal issue or let a friend know they are upset with them via text message.

The study continues to illustrate the serious impact of stress on college students.

- Being stressed is a fact of life on college campuses today. 63% of students say that stress has kept them from their schoolwork once or more in the past few months. Up from 53% in the May 2009 poll, 62% of students say at least once in the past three months they have felt so stressed they didn't want to hang out with friends or participate in social activities.
- 14% of students say they themselves have been diagnosed with a mental health condition. 20% say they have friends who have talked about wanting to end their lives in the past year and 9% say they have thought about it themselves. An alarming 13% of students say they have a friend who has attempted suicide.

For perpetually connected college students, technology can also provide some positive means to escape and de-stress.

- 52% of college students report spending 2-6 hours online, with 33% online for more than 6 hours daily.
- In some examples of how pervasive computers are, 9 in 10 said they'd visited a social networking site in the past week while about the same number got or sent email. Over three-quarters used the Internet to catch up on movies, TV shows sports or entertainment news.
- Two-thirds say they watch TV or movies online to get their mind off of things, with 51% using social networking sites as a way to relax. Around a quarter (mostly guys) play video games online, while nearly as many (chiefly women) use the Internet to shop. Similar numbers send instant messages, email, read blogs or chat using video connections like Skype.
- In fact, 57% of college students say that removing technology completely from their lives would make things more stressful, double the 25% who say it would have a calming effect.

METHODOLOGY:

The mtvU and Jed Foundation survey with the AP involved interviews with 2,207 undergraduate students ages 18-24 at 40 randomly chosen four-year colleges with enrollments of at least 1,000 students. Interviews were conducted by Edison Research from September 20 through 24, 2010. Interviewers first interviewed the students in person to determine their eligibility, then provided respondents with a self-administered questionnaire that students completed with guarantees of anonymity. To protect privacy, the schools where the study was conducted are not being identified and the students who were interviewed were not asked for their names. The survey has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3.0 percentage points.

mtvU's sponsorship of the study is related to its mental health campaign "Half of Us," which it runs in partnership with the Jed Foundation, a nonprofit group that works to reduce suicide among young people. For the third year, mtvU and the Jed Foundation have partnered with the AP to explore the mental health of today's college students.