LIKE A LOT OF COUPLES, Judy and Bert came to therapy with the feeling that they were gradually, insidiously drifting apart. Bert, a technology specialist responsible for the computer network of a large international banking firm, carried his pager with him at all times. “I have to be accessible 24/7,” he noted with a mix of pride and exhaustion. “The system can go down at any time, and I’ve got to be ready for emergencies.”

But for Judy, a freelance magazine writer, things had gone too far several months earlier, when Bert began bringing his pager to bed—placing it between his and Judy’s pillow—lest he miss a call while sleeping. The metaphoric meaning of this arrangement was not lost on her writerly mind. “Your work has, literally and figuratively, come between us,” she cried. Bert flushed

**by**

**Peter Fraenkel**

**Beeper in the Bedro**

*Psychology Today* May/June 2001

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to the tips of his ears. He glanced nervously at his shoe tops. It was as though Judy had just revealed an embarrassing secret. "But face it, Judy," he said at last. "You’re up at all hours on the computer surfing the Net and writing."

Judy acknowledged that this was true. "That’s partly ‘cause I like to write at night," she said, "but partly because you’re so often on the phone with the office that I have to entertain myself!"

Their case, up to this point, struck me as a fairly typical, low-grade marital dispute. Nothing particularly challenging or noteworthy from a therapeutic point of view. But in a heated instant Judy blurted an ultimatum that has occupied my thinking ever since. "Bert," she cried, "if you don’t take that beeper out of bed I will divorce you!"

I felt as though a light had switched on. And I use the electronic metaphor advisedly. In that moment, I realized how the technological tools meant to make our lives easier were making them more complicated. These gadgets promised to free us from our offices, and give us more time for the people and activities we love. But in many ways, this freedom was illusory because we're always just one beep, one phone call or one e-mail away from the working world. The breakthrough for me as a therapist—and for Bert and Judy as a couple—came when we began to bring their relationship with technology out from the margins, and into the center of the therapeutic conversation.

Due to the nature of their work, Bert and Judy were immersed more deeply in technology than most people. But by now, even those of us who live on distant mountaintops can name at least one way in which our lives have been changed for better or worse by computers, the Internet, cell phones, faxes, pagers, personal digital assistants (PDAs) and wireless handheld devices such as BlackBerrys that send and receive e-mail—not to mention televisions, VCRs, DVD players, Walkmans and portable CD players. The technological revolution has already so transformed us that it’s hard even to remember what it felt like to live in a world without all this electronically mediated connectivity and stimulation.

As these techo-tools increasingly populate all our flat surfaces at work and at home, struggle against us in our pockets and on our hips, ride with us in our purses, briefcases, backpacks and cars, they beckon us into an accelerated reality in which geographical distance and time zones evaporate, in which information, images and conversations can be grasped and released with the click of a button. They invite us into a world of seemingly limitless experience, without borders, constantly changing.

In the process, this technology is altering our very consciousness, our sense of identity and personal integrity, how we form and sustain our most intimate relationships, how we balance our work lives and our home lives, our material existence with the pursuit of spirituality. We are forced to reexamine our fundamental values—to redefine who we are, what we do, whom and what we care about and what we stand for.

As I’ve thought about my own experiences and listened to my clients, colleagues and friends talk about their lives, it has seemed to me that our digital technology’s all-pervasiveness is transforming the very nature of our most precious resource without which we cannot work, love, learn or play—our time. Technology is changing not just how much time we feel we have and how we use it; our relationship with technology is changing our experience of the substance and texture of time itself—its basic tempo, its consistency of flow (or lack thereof), how it eddies around and through us. Squinting at the rows and columns of appointments in our electronic calendars, we realize that, in temporal terms, our obligations often outweigh our assets. Attempting to respond to the daily barrage of e-mails from similarly time-pressed colleagues who need our well-considered response ASAP, we feel the pace of life accelerating. With faxes pumping, voice mails playing, cell phones ringing and pagers buzzing, our focus fragments. We inevitably answer the question, “How are you?” with the breathless one-word mantra of the 21st century—“Busy!”

As a community, therapists have barely moved beyond sidelong glances at technology’s impact on our clients. This brave new world is at least as unfamiliar to us as it is to them. But as daily life becomes more and more a race against the clock and as individuals acquire the capacity to be virtually everywhere, we will need to be increasingly alert to the role technology plays in creating, manifesting or intensifying internal and interpersonal conflict. We need to begin to catalog both the obvious and subtle ways in which technology has permeated and altered our lives and those of the clients we see.
We're succumbing to the myth of infinite possibility—the belief that if we organize our time, we can have it all.

We've become lean, mean activity machines.

Andersen Consulting, 63 percent of the respondents said they had contact with their employers while on vacation. Many of my friends and clients have had to cancel or truncate hard-earned family getaways after receiving a call about a "crisis" at work. If that isn't a recipe for family stress and job burnout, I don't know what is.

Even if the beeps, rings and vibrations emitted by our electronic companions go unanswered, their effect is still felt. Consciousness splits momentarily between the "here" and the "there." Unseen others join us in potential form, requiring only the press of our thumb to become players in whatever life story happens to be unfolding at that moment. I've certainly noticed this in therapy sessions. With one couple I see, the partner who carries a cell typically ignores his calls, but there's always a punctuation in the rhythm of what we're talking about, a jarring pause that typically requires someone to say, "So, we were talking about . . .

Although communication technologies often make it possible for us, especially women, to pursue a career and raise children, being constantly accessible to everyone means rarely feeling that you are where you should be. One client of mine, a lawyer for a major Wall Street firm, explained how the cell phone is essential to maintaining the illusion for clients that she works full time, even though she juggles her part-time career with parenting two young children. When she's at home with the kids, she can take or make crucial business calls "even in the sandbox." When she's away from the kids, the cell phone allows the nanny or the school to reach her immediately. Although she manages to serve everyone's needs pretty well, her stress level is high and enjoyment of "the moment" is often low.

Sighing, she notes, "If I get a call from the nanny, I feel guilty about not being at home; if I get an urgent call from a client while at the playground, I feel torn between the kids and the job."

Indeed, while our gadgets make us almost universally available, they can also isolate us from those under our own roof. Many parents describe a home life in which each member of the family is absorbed in a different technologically transmitted entertainment. They share little beyond common surroundings and access to the same refrigerator. Opportunities are lost to share positive experiences, to engage in conflicts, to grow closer as these are resolved, to talk, to touch.

Even that infamous chamber of joy when our teen clients seem deeply alienated from their parents, it should now be routine to ask how much time the kids are spending immersed in technology.

Computers and other devices promise "better living through electronic organization," but I've noted that my clients who use these devices are the most frantic, running from appointment to appointment, enlisting their kids in every possible after-school class, lest there be some gaping hole in their college-bound résumés. These families may have led overstuffed lives to begin with, but I believe that these machines encourage the fantasy that we can shove more and more activities into those immaculate time bites. We're succumb-

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thing else is run by the clock, spontaneity has to be scheduled, too. I frequently encourage clients to schedule spontaneous time into their lives, and onto their PDAs. It strikes them as odd at first, but eventually they recognize that this is the only way in which they can attend to this fundamental need.

Like crustaceans shedding their shells and forming new ones that provide the structure that stimulates them to grow, the technological infrastructure of our lives changes each time a newer, faster microprocessor hits the market, and we feel we must grow into this new "shell." However, much of human life, especially in relationships, still proceeds at the pace of human emotion. Disagreements take time to discuss and resolve; empathy for the other’s feelings and point of view can’t simply be downloaded into our brains; and helping our kids move along a healthy path and away from problem behaviors takes time and attention. We know this instinctively, yet we sometimes experience an uncomfortable discrepancy between the speed at which our technology operates and the speed at which our hearts, minds and souls can respond. At the very least, the revved-up pace we attain online may require new skills in shifting gears when we log off the computer and turn our attention toward one another.

Redefining the Self

Despite the adjustments that it forces upon us, living in techno-time is often a thrill. Sometimes, when I’m really in high gear surrounded by all my electronic paraphernalia, with Miles Davis’s album Birth of the Cool playing on the CD-ROM, I can practically feel the flow of electricity between me and my tools. As I multitask away, I’m loving the ride my technologies provide. And it’s not just the speed and mosaiklike complexity of electronic life that feels so enticing to me and countless others. It’s a new sense of limitless possibilities, of blurred and broken boundaries, that powerfully draws us in.

Once there, we feel as if we are a node in a gigantic web, a neuron in a universal mind, high on our capacity to spread some part of ourselves instantly across the globe. Our ungainly corporeal bodies start to seem like nothing more than biological vessels for our own electrical currents, useful only in lending bone, muscle and fingertip to close the gap to others by pushing the buttons of our metal and plastic appendages. No wonder our boring old, predictable, real-time relationships with partners, parents, children and flesh-and-blood friends start to look pretty darned dull.

As technology compresses time, allowing us to fly across old relational and geographic borders, it not only connects us with new and intriguing others, it transforms our fundamental experience and definition of self. Indeed, much of the excitement in cyber-relationships lies in escaping our own limitations: We can be anyone we want on the Internet. We can overstate our attractiveness, change our gender or sexual orientation, make ourselves older or younger, darker or lighter, richer or more exciting. And best of all, someone will respond to this new person!

The limitless possibilities technology provides leave the very definition of one’s "real self" open to question. Is our real self corporeal or is it digital? Do we exist most authentically in the physical world, shaped by history and circumstance, or in cyberspace, where a freshly created self embodies our deepest longings? Like transsexuals who feel their real self is locked inside an incorrectly gendered body, we begin to question our single, embodied selfhood.

Not only are grown-ups experimenting with multiple selves on the Internet; kids are doing it, too. Some of our colleagues, like sociologist Sherry Turkle of MIT, have raised concerns about the impact of this phenomenon, especially during a period in which kids are wrestling with issues of identity. Turkle points out that for some teens, the excitement and novelty of self-creation and Internet relationships usurps their relationships with real-life peers and family members, potentially interrupting the development of age-appropriate social skills and family connections.

On the other hand, for some teens, as well as adults, their Internet identity can serve as a secure base from which to venture out and develop flesh-and-blood relationships. I recently treated Josh, a bright but socially awkward 15-year-old with severe acne. Shy, thin and fragile-looking, but with a wry sense of humor, Josh was a self-described "computer geek." He spent almost no time outside of school with his classmates or age mates in his neighborhood, but he had developed a powerful persona as the manager of a website for a computer magazine. In that capacity, he was respected and depended upon by many
people whom he had never met. Josh frequently stayed up till all hours managing the site, neglecting homework and sleep. As a result, he was constantly late for school and unprepared for class, causing his grades to suffer. His parents were frantic, yet reluctant to take his computer away because he needed it to complete school assignments. The conflict between parents and son often escalated into shouting matches, with Josh eventually withdrawing to his room to go online.

In therapy, Josh told his parents for the first time what his Internet identity meant to him. They, in turn, related with empathy that they, both had been shy at his age, spoke with pride about his computer skills and expressed more calmly their worries about his sleep, schoolwork and social life. Josh and I then met several times to work out a daily routine in which he balanced his Internet activities with his school responsibilities, which he now recognized as critical to his goal of becoming a computer scientist. Eventually, he warmed to the idea of inviting some of his schoolmates over and letting them in on his Internet life. Buoyed by his newfound status among his peers, Josh was soon accepting invitations to join them for non-computer-related activities. “You know,” he told me with a grin, “real live people aren’t so bad after all!”

Technology Issues in the Consulting Room

Josh’s confidence in his Internet identity gave him the courage to form flesh-and-blood relationships. But many of my clients have a difficult time untangling the virtual from the actual. Increasingly, I’ve found myself counseling couples and families who cannot agree on what it means to be “there” for one another.

Are we “there” for our families when our time with them is interrupted by the arrival of a fax or the buzz of a BlackBerry? If our loved ones are always on the phone with their offices, do we gradually lower our expectations of what it means to be “with” them? The technologies at our disposal have made spatial boundaries obsolete. But we still need to “meet” others in the dimension of time. And during that time we need to say yes to one connection and no to all others.

My clients Bert and Judy had a hard time doing that. His pager and her computer had erased the boundary between work and home. If they were to rebuild their intimacy, they would need to set limits by turning off the technology.

Judy agreed wholeheartedly; Bert protested. He feared that he might lose his job if he curtailed his availability. But Judy had been talking to the wives of Bert’s colleagues and she’d learned from therapists as our world spins further into the technological age is not to match each technology and its effects on our clients’ lives with some nifty new technique to handle it. Rather, I think we can best help by raising our clients’ awareness of the growing impact of technology on their experience of time, their relationships, their work lives and their identities.

Since treating Bert and Judy, I have been trying to raise other clients’ awareness of the impact of technology on them. In doing so, I’ve become aware of the two major ways technology enters into our clients’ difficulties: our new gadgets can directly trigger stress, confusion and discord in our relationships by accelerating the pace of our lives, overloading us with information, dissolving the boundaries between work and home and providing an easy escape into more satisfying “virtual” identities. But technology can also become the lightning rod for existing conflicts and interpersonal struggles.

In one couple I worked with, Leslie wished to regain the intimacy she remembered having with her husband, Sid, before the children were born. Sid remembered no such intimacy, and in any case, wasn’t eager to create it now. Personality differences, old hurts and misunderstandings, along with years of long hours spent apart working to make ends meet underlay their conflict. But it
was expressed through Leslie’s angry insistence that Sid keep his cell phone on all day and his quiet, persistent refusal to do so. Their struggles about the cell phone provided an excellent jumping off point from which to dive into “deeper,” more pervasive, concerns about trust and love.

Fifteen-year-old Tina and her mother Betty lived in the formidable South Bronx. Conflict between mother and daughter had erupted recently, centering on Tina’s repeated plea for a beeper. For Tina the beeper would link her to school and neighborhood friends, make her feel she belonged; to her mother, a religious, Jamaican immigrant, a beeper would link Tina, literally and symbolically, to “the wrong crowd—free of electronic gadgetry or the explosion of connectivity it provides. These tools are here to stay.

Although I think awareness-building is key, I have found a few interventions and metaphors particularly useful in taking charge of technology. For instance, with time-pressed clients, I often draw on the analogy to kayaking. I suggest that if one approaches the supercharged, technology-infused busy periods of one’s life as a challenging, white-water journey, with the multiple responsibilities and deadlines each representing a rock to navigate around or a rapid to traverse, it can actually be thrilling. Technology largely creates these rapids, but it can also help us navigate the waters.

Of course, the problem comes when one that puts choice at the center of how we cope.

As with Bert and Judy, I work with my clients to create “no-technology zones” or regular “sacred times” in their lives that allow them to slow down, to reconnect with others, to shift from the pressures of chronological time to the unmeasured, unmonitored flow of event time—to spend time “unplugged.” The art of living well with technology lies in being able to shift gracefully from periods of high acceleration and electronic connectivity to periods of slowness and, for want of a better term, “organic connectivity.” And to shift back again when it’s time to go into technospeed.

To smooth out the downward shift, I often recommend creating a “decom

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drug dealers, prostitutes and such.”

Discussing this mother and daughter’s conflict over a beeper opened the door to powerful feelings about immigration and acculturation. Coming to terms with these feelings, in turn, freed them to resolve their struggles over the family technology. Betty bought beepers and cell phones for her daughter and herself. The new hardware was a sign to Tina that her mother understood and trusted her. It also helped mother and daughter keep in touch during the day. In this happy instance, the technology that once symbolized their growing estrangement eventually brought them together.

**Interventions for the Techno-age**

As therapists, we must be both flexible and realistic in dealing with the role that technology plays in our clients’ lives. We must neither be seduced into mindless submission to the glittering potentials of technology and the unending “content” it delivers, nor retreat into atavistic longing for a world life seems like one long white-water trip; we need tranquil portions on life’s river that permit us to turn our attention away from moment-to-moment transactions and gently focus on ourselves and one another. This problem is not limited to our psychotherapy clients: Clearly, the need for a break from the hyped-up interface with technology is widely felt. Witness the explosion of books, magazines, home furnishing stores and catalogs that promise “simplicity” or the new rush to yoga classes. Yet, whatever our passing fantasies, few of us can or are prepared to “leave it all” and start up a simple, slowed-down life. What we seek is that old standby, “balance”; but today, finding that balance and the time that it takes to achieve it can seem like mission impossible.

Why? I think we are being guided by the wrong metaphor. A slower pace, and the resulting tranquility, are not things that we can “find”—as if they were semi-precious stones lodged within a mass of plain rock. Rather, we need to make time, carve out time, set aside time—pick your metaphor—but select pression chamber.” With couples, for instance, I recommend that each partner list the sequence of activities she or he needs to unwind after a fragmented, high-speed day. Then the couples create a sequence that allows for time alone and together, and prepares them to meet the evening reinvigorated and reconnected.

Although it’s important to create and preserve these more extended periods of downtime, postponing relaxation until then can feel like holding your breath for hours. So I recommend spreading little moments of enjoyment and connection—what I’ve called “Sixty-Second Pleasure Points”—throughout the day. Our technology comes in handy in making these happen. One couple I saw sent each other e-mails at regular intervals during the day, but these missives pertained primarily to errands and chores. Inspired by the idea of the Sixty-Second Pleasure Point, they have begun taking time to create brief moments of fun and sensuality throughout the day by joking, gossiping or sending an erotic massage in code.

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Beeper in the Bedroom, from page 29

To help family members make contact when apart, I suggest creating regular rhythms of "thereness"—times when they can reliably be reached, no matter which technological channel they choose. For instance, Tony's attempts to reach Susan by cell phone when she was in other cities on business typically resulted in angry and hurtful exchanges, either because he'd tried repeatedly without success or she was preoccupied with whomever she was talking to when he called. Although this couple had deeper issues around trust and jealousy, much tension was relieved when they arranged regular call-in times convenient to both partners.

Visions of the Future

In her book Jump Time, human potential movement pioneer Jean Houston writes, "The Net...is the matrix within which cultures meet and propagate in new fusions and peoples exchange their social DNA at a remarkable rate. From this mating, a whole new species is being born." Houston marvels at the process of throwing a question or idea out to an online community as if it were a damp ball of clay and watching how cyberfriends in far-flung places catch it, twist it, pull it, inscribe themselves upon it and throw it back, remolded, transformed, ready for the next round of "catch and shape." She talks about a reciprocal loop in which the Internet and its adepts feed one another in an infinite spiral of creativity and evolution. With "everything and everyone woven into a fabric of information, ideas, experiences," the stage is set for a global convergence the likes of which earlier humanist and spiritual leaders could only dream.

What an exhilarating vision of our technologically bound future! Will it come to pass? It might. But who can say whether other, less sanguine uses of the Internet might not prevail? With vast numbers of the world's peoples still living in abject poverty or oppressive sociopolitical circumstances, how will they contribute directly to the global online conversation? What's to keep the Web from becoming not the vehicle of respectful intercultural unity, but of rampant psycho-colonialism and economic imperialism, swiftly homogenizing the
world’s beliefs, traditions and desires?
For me, the answer to these frightening questions emerges from Houston’s notion of the reciprocal influence between human and machine, between our consciousness and Net consciousness. And the therapist and community psychologist in me see something in this notion that the Internet “true believers” may miss: namely, that how we are raised and live our lives, our values, our wisdom, our intentions ultimately will determine whether the Internet (and all the other technological means for connectivity) becomes a constructive force or a destructive one. No dot.com can create the perfect software filter that selects just the right wisdom, downloads it into our brains as infants and produces loving, caring human beings. Even if such a website existed, it is still we who need to select it.

If anything, the explosion of information and stimulation now at our fingertips requires that, more than ever, individuals, families and communities step back and take stock of who they are, what they wish to become and how technology can help or hinder those goals.

That’s where we therapists come in. With our powerful but decidedly non-technological gifts of hosting conversation, elucidating and shifting meaning, bringing stilled perceptions and emotions forward and discerning relationships between consciousness and context, therapists may well become the guides and cartographers of this brave new balance between technology and our enduring but ever-changing humanity.

In the meantime, whatever you do, don’t bring your laptop or beeper to bed.

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