

Experts in psychology emphasize benefits of in-person interaction

Say cyber-communication has its shortfalls

by Leslie Moses
STAFF WRITER

CLARKSBURG — Moriah May, 14, talked with friends the other day — five pals in five different places at about the same time.

“That’s basically the only thing I use Facebook for is to chat with my friends,” the rising Liberty High freshman said.

The electronic-savvy teenager keeps a balance, though: About two hours on Facebook each day, plus outdoor athletics at Veterans Memorial Park with friends.

Face-to-face interaction is a good thing, according to Bridgeport licensed professional counselor Larry Bell.

Some also say fewer in-person conversations aren’t bad, either.

But for better relationships, and for better communication, you might want to meet face-to-face, according to Bell.

Friendships, which can bring security and confidence, need trust and in-person bonding time, Bell said.

Electronically, you don’t get body language and facial expression to tell if someone’s being honest or flippant, Bell said.

“I think you’re going to be able to trust your friends if you get the full range of communication,” he said.

Plus, person-to-person chats can make you a better communicator, which is good for confidence and the workplace, where communication skills are needed.

“It makes you more well-rounded,” Bell said.

But Nicolas Bowman, a West Virginia University professor of communication studies, adds the word “enhance” to the debate on electronic communications.

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Facebook, email, Twitter and text messages just open more talk time to others not with you — at the airport, grocery store, in your car, Bowman said.

May, for example, now living in Salem, relies on Facebook to “talk” to her out-of-state friends she might otherwise miss.

“I can’t hang out with my friends in Louisiana and Massachusetts,” May said.

Bowman, who studies the psychology of communication technology, said people mostly talk online to maintain face-to-face relationships of the past or to bring current relationships to a face-to-face meeting.

Internet connections aren’t replacing in-person connections,

Bowman said. “We’re just seeing more communication, period.”

But there is a downside.

Among the problems Bowman listed: Sleeplessness. “Popcorn brain,” with attention split 50 ways. Lots of “friends” and shrinking personal space. And if you take a 30-minute time out and turn off your cell phone, some think you’re being selfish.

“We can only handle so much,” Bowman said.

Bowman, a runner, says much like a runner after a race, people’s brains need a “cool-down period” after too much computer time.

Some people check Facebook before bed and Twitter on into the night. They can’t sleep or turn off the activity.

“Their brains can’t let go of the information,” Bowman said.

The health issues — mainly

emotional — that arise are small but cumulative, Bowman said.

Besides stress and fatigue, impatience can grow from time online. Folks grow accustomed to having information instantly, he said.

Any delay in response may then trigger painful assumptions. Back in the day, if you phoned someone and they didn’t answer, you just assumed they were busy. Today you assume something is amiss.

Research suggests this conditioning from electronic communications can increase stress and relational instability, Bowman said.

But for all its ills, Bowman still sees the good.

“Many of these online connections keep us connected to friends and family when we can’t physically be there,” he said.