

# Signal BOOST

Send your teen these messages instead of a text

By Daniel J. Siegel, M.D.



**S**ocial media has a reputation for being nothing but trouble for teenagers. There are many upsides to social media, not least of which is that it provides a way for teens to connect with one another. What concerns me more than simply the time spent on screens is the time not spent in direct face-to-face connection.

The brain has two sides: the social, more emotionally dominant right side of the brain and the literal, logical and more objective left side. The right hemisphere picks up the more subtle signals of someone's inner state—their feelings, meanings and intentions—but may not be as engaged on digital screens as it is in real-life interactions in person.

Since the brain responds to the energy and information that streams into it, it is deeply concerning that spending more time at the surface level of communication, something the left hemisphere can do quite well, will leave us with a surface level sense of who we are.

The digital world of chatting and texting is generally confined to letters and words. The photos and videos often sent are not interactive; they are unilateral streaming of information.

And so the transmission of digital information is

often just that—a one-way sending, not real-time deep engagement, not a sharing back and forth in open interaction. Our teens write e-mails, type out chat responses, and lob texts with delayed and word-based responses instead of engaging with eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice, posture, gestures or touch.

But it is the right hemisphere that provides and decodes these nonverbal cues that have a spectrum of values. Some scientists have suggested that our deepest sense of identity, our emotional and social self, is created within the synaptic connections of our right hemispheres.

My concern is that with our personal and cultural adjustment to these digital, often one-way and unspoken means of connecting with others—which are left-hemisphere dominant—we'll also come to know ourselves in very unspoken ways. We'll focus on the text and miss the context. The emptiness many people describe feeling these days then gets reflected in an urgency to pick up that phone or respond to that message, even when we are barreling down the highway at 60 miles an hour.

When a friend's car was nearly demolished by a 50-year-old man who simply drove through a red light

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JOIN WITH OTHERS IN REAL-TIME, FACE-TO-FACE CONVERSATIONS THAT CONNECT US TO AN AUTHENTIC WAY OF BEING.

while he was on the phone, it made me realize how this preoccupation is way more than an adolescent addiction. And when that same man got out of the car and apologized by saying, "I'm sorry, I was on the phone"—as if that was a permissible excuse for nearly killing three innocent victims—it made me sense that something huge is happening in our world.

As a neuropsychiatrist, I can't help but wonder if his dominant left hemisphere just blandly gave a logical, language-based excuse, one that, though "rational," actually makes no emotional or social sense. His literal mind missed the larger meaning of what happened.

Adolescents and adults alike can seem so focused on a phone connection, so desperate to find our selves created in that communication, that we are willing to inadvertently kill someone else, or ourselves. It suggests an internal emptiness, a lopsided development of an inner sense of self—and perhaps even the brain itself—which creates a deep desperation for being connected. That's how urgent feeling empty can be.

What can be done? It's simple. Connect with each other with both sides of our brains.

### Have an actual, face-to-face conversation in real time.

Let's start by focusing on the ways a deeper and more present sense of self is created: Join with others in real-time, face-to-face conversations that connect us to an authentic way of being. This means we send and receive signals revealing our inner experience, our subtle sensations, that reveal our subjective mental lives.

### Take a time-in.

We can remind parents that this "mindsight" way of seeing the mind is something humans are naturally inclined to do—if they are given the opportunity. So I suggest that we all take some "time-in" to consider reflecting on our inner sense of who we are. When we then connect with others from that inner place, life begins to change. Even studies of the brain reveal that people who take a time-in on a regular basis, who are present for life in a mindful way, can connect with others with more empathy and compassion.

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### Focus on the nonverbal.

Try to keep an eye on the important nonverbal forms of communication that most directly reveal how we feel inside. When we are aware of these signals sent from others, we can increase our sense of being connected in a deep, authentic and life-affirming way. These seven signals include:

- 1) Eye contact
- 2) Facial expressions
- 3) Tone of voice
- 4) Posture
- 5) Gestures and appropriate touch
- 6) Timing of response
- 7) Intensity of response

When these seven nonverbal messages are sent and received from the important social and emotional centers of the brain, primarily on the right side, they give us a feeling of being seen and of being secure.

Our relationships create us, and supportive relationships create security and health in our lives. Living life with an emphasis on direct ways of connecting with each other, using both sides of the brain, in person or even online, may reclaim our deeply social selves, and allow us to become more fulfilled in our lives. ☺



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