

Here are 10 commandments to save users from the tyranny of constant connection.

Cellphone Sanity

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I knew we were in trouble the day I looked around the dinner table and saw everybody else peering down. My wife was checking on a ball game. Daughter A was texting with her boyfriend. Daughter B was urgently checking her e-mail — on my borrowed smartphone, since even as a budding computer scientist she tries not to be a slave to technology.

All irony aside, the truth is that nearly everybody I know has yielded to the tyranny of these devices, and I'm as guilty as anyone else. I've e-mailed editors and sources from Phillies games, annoyed nearby passengers on trains, and texted from darkened theaters. And those are just the sins most easily confessed.

But most of us are torn, at least a bit, by the communications revolution that offers a powerful, connected computer in any pocket or purse. Even more than ordinary cellphones, smartphones have imposed a dramatic change in the rhythms of everyday life.

Or threaten to, unless we resist. That's what drew my eye to the sort of e-mail — a public-relations pitch — that I tend to ignore. It came courtesy of a Florida company, CableOrganizer.com, with the title "10 Commandments of Cellphone Use."

Don't get the wrong idea. This isn't a list with admonishments like "Thou shalt not sext thy neighbor's wife" or "Honor thy father and mother by returning their calls or messages," although, come to think of it, both would be great ideas.

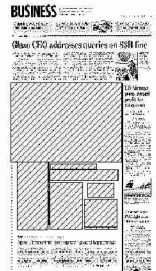
Instead, it's a list of rules to live by in a world of ubiquitous connectivity. We're the bosses of these things, and we can agree — to the same extent that we accept any common sense of manners — on limits that preserve our peace, quiet, nonelectronic



Phone conversations at the movies can irritate others. BONNIE SCHUPP / iStockphoto.com

connections, and sanity.

Is it complete? You can read and decide — send me suggestions if you disagree or find glaring omissions. I was impressed that it hit most of my own pet peeves about cellphone use, such as callers who carry on conversations as if waiters and other service workers don't exist, plus some I hadn't considered, such as letting voice mail handle any call that isn't truly urgent.



Mildred Munjanganja, who coauthored the commandments with her boss, Paul Holstein, has confronted the lunacy of seeing all communication as urgent in her own life.

"I'd catch myself reading e-mails while I drove — while stopped at a light," she told me. "And you think it's urgent, so you begin to respond." She was cured one day by the recognition that she would have hit a pedestrian if her attention had returned a brief moment later. Now she bans phone use in her car.

Here's Munjanganja and Holstein's list:

1. Respect those you're with. Don't check out from live conversation to shoot the breeze, they say. "If you make social plans with someone, they are the first priority and deserve your undivided time and attention." Memo to my family: Dinner at home counts, too.

2. Let voice mail handle nonurgent calls when appropriate. "Voice mail exists for a reason," they note. Let it cover calls during parent-teacher conferences, family meals, and the rest. You get to decide what's urgent, of course. But if everything qualifies, you're not being sufficiently discriminating, or you need to de-stress your life.

3. Set a good example to the younger generation. Holstein and Munjanganja say it's like modeling any polite behavior or teaching "please" and "thank you," and I don't disagree — even if I'll have to aim to do better with my grandkids. The problem is, most adults are still struggling themselves with how to draw these lines.

4. Wait to text, and save a life (yours). This should be obvious — just like "Thou shalt not kill," which is exactly what you're risking, along with your own life.

5. Stash your cell when dining out. Your fellow restaurant patrons — including those sharing your table — don't want "to become a captive audience to a third party cellphone conversation," Holstein and Munjanganja say. To which I'd add, you can always excuse yourself for a

truly urgent call. But remember Commandment 2.

6. Remember when "private time" is in order. Um, they're talking places where running and flushing water are the ordinary background noise, and suggesting you not add your own soundtrack — especially since you have no idea who's on the other side of a stall wall.

7. Keep arguments under wraps. "It's easy to get wrapped up in an argument, but remember that others can't see or hear the hothead on the other end of the line," they say. This goes for office cubicles, too.

8. Mind your manners. Language and stories that others might find offensive are their concern here, so they suggest this reasonable rule: "If you wouldn't walk through a busy public place with a particular word or comment printed on your T-shirt, don't use it in cellphone conversations when within earshot of strangers."

9. Don't ignore universal quiet zones. This broadens the "don't add your own soundtrack" rule of theaters to other places where quiet should reign, such as houses of worship. "It's imperative to heed the mandate to shut off cell phones completely," they say. "Not only so they don't make a notable sound, but also so that intrusive screen light does not distract, both of which are highly disrespectful to those around you."

10. Don't make service personnel wait. This isn't just disrespectful, though that's reason enough to pay heed. Munjanganja says restaurateurs have told her that the cumulative effect of cellphone delays is also harming their business. While the waitress waits for you to finish your call, she can't be waiting on anyone else.

That's their list — you can read all their commentary at <http://tinyurl.com/c5gltp>. What would you add or subtract?

Contact Jeff Gelles at 215-854-2776 or jgelles@phillynews.com.

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