

# MY *TECH-WISE* LIFE

Growing Up and Making Choices  
in a World of Devices

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Andy and Amy Crouch, *My Techwise Life*  
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# 1

## we don't have to compare ourselves

*when social media freaks us out*

As I scrolled through the Instagram photos, I felt my stomach churn. The first one was terrible—did my smile look that awkward in real life? Then another; my nose seemed to take up half my face. And in another one, my expression was okay, but what on earth was I doing with my arm? As I flicked through photo after photo, I started to panic.

The photos had just rolled in from a school dance, and they were full of smart suits and glittering dresses. Unlike me, my friends all looked perfect. I gazed at one friend's smile. How was it so effortless? Looking back at my own, all I saw was a forced get-me-out-of-here grin that made me look like a gremlin.

Of course, my friends all started to post on Instagram and spammed our group chat with caption ideas and gushing compliments. As they went on, I started to get more and more upset. I didn't want anyone to see these photos *ever*—if I could have stolen my friend's camera and deleted them from the memory card, I'd have been happy.

For the next few days, I kept choking up every time I opened my Instagram feed and saw other people's pictures. I was sobbing in bed and wallowing in newfound despair over flaws I didn't even know I had. And even as I was sniffling into a tissue, I was wondering, *What on earth is wrong with me? Am I really so shallow that a few thousand pixels can set me off like this?* I didn't usually obsess over my looks, and my friends always supported me when I was feeling down—why couldn't I just shrug this off?

Even now, I can't totally answer those questions; I don't think I'll ever be able to entirely unpack what was going on in my mind that weekend. But I can say something definitive about this moment: it's not unusual. In fact, pretty much everyone will experience something like this.

Now, I'm not saying you've cried over a bad photo. In fact, the thought you'd ever be upset by a picture might seem ridiculous. But it might not be about a picture of yourself. Maybe it was when you saw those videos from the party you weren't invited to, or when your friends bragged about getting perfect scores on the test you failed; maybe it's your parents' disappointment when you didn't make the team.

Whatever the cause, I know we've all been gripped by this fear that we aren't good enough. Even if we think of ourselves as confident, healthy people, we have sudden moments of terror that we'll never measure up to our friends or our family—or our enemies.

You and I aren't alone in this; our great-grandparents and their great-grandparents struggled with confidence too. Humans do this all the time—we frantically compare ourselves to others, hoping we can at least be a little smarter or stronger than someone else. But deep down, we know that there are seven billion people on earth and we will never be the best. Even Usain Bolt's record will be smashed someday.

This means that when we frown in the mirror, or wince after being embarrassed, we're in good company. But we're also especially unlucky. We happen to live in one of the worst possible times and places to be insecure—a time when we're surrounded by tech companies that make their money and grab our attention by telling us that our lives aren't enough.

Just over a quarter of Americans ages thirteen to twenty-one (27 percent) admit that when we post online, we're sometimes tempted to make things up to make ourselves seem more exciting or interesting. And for 44 percent of us, seeing other people's posts makes us feel like our lives don't match up—like our friends' lives are better than ours.

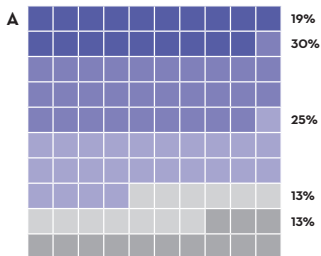
Of course, technology isn't the source of our insecurities—it's not like people suddenly started feeling bad about themselves when the iPhone showed up. But much of the technology

## Social (Media) Pressure

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

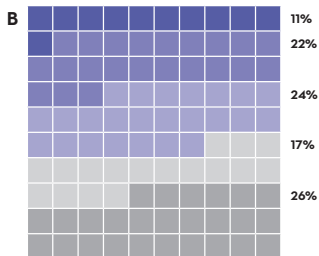


A *It makes feel me feel good when I have a lot of followers on social media (percent excludes those who say they don't use social media)*



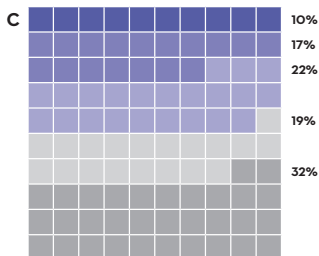
Youth on social media, n=1,102

B *If I post something and don't get very many "likes" or comments, I feel sad (percent excludes those who say they don't use social media)*



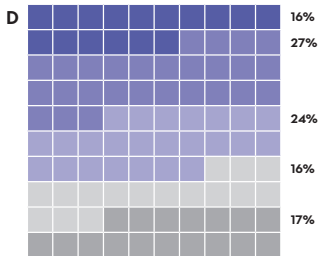
Youth on social media, n=1,102

C *Sometimes when I post, I (am tempted to) make up things about my life to make it seem more exciting or interesting (percent excludes those who say they don't use social media)*



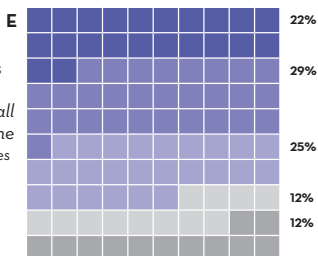
Youth on social media, n=1,102

D *When I see things online about my friends or peers, I feel like their lives are better than mine (percent excludes those who say they don't use social media)*



Youth on social media, n=1,102

E *Sometimes it's exhausting to keep up with all the posts online (percent excludes those who say they don't use social media)*



Youth on social media, n=1,102

Andy and Amy Crouch, My Techwsie Life

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filling our lives both encourages anxiety and profits from it. Savvy phone companies want us to worry that our phones are uncool and out of date after two years. Free apps bombard us with ads trying to convince us that our lives are just too boring and hard.

Keeping up is hard enough—let alone putting our best face forward. Half of us admit to being exhausted by the endless stream of online posts.

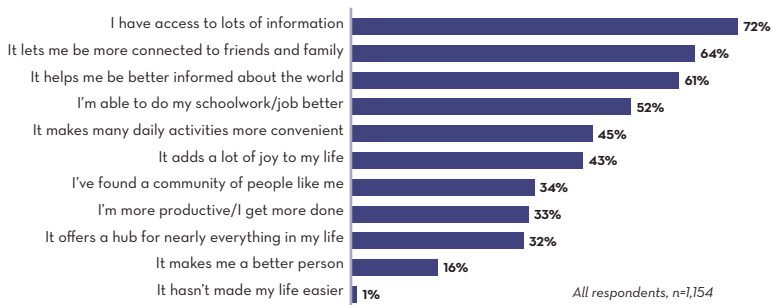
Our social media feeds show us thrilling vacations and parties while we slouch, exhausted, on our couches—and then we snap pictures of ourselves when the lighting is good and pretend our lives are always exciting too.

When we engage with technology, we're surrounded by messages that our lives are missing something. Reminders of our imperfection are always lurking in our pockets.



What do we do about this? Technology isn't going to magically disappear from the face of the earth, and we don't want it to. Our phones and the internet don't just make us insecure, they also improve our lives. We can connect with far-off friends and family, we can educate ourselves on any topic imaginable, we can search for creative inspiration—not to mention the little ways tech helps, like telling us the weather, reminding us of our to-do lists, and counting our steps. Like everything in our lives, tech both helps and hurts us. So how can we appreciate the help but avoid the hurt?

*In what ways does technology (smartphones, computers) make your life genuinely easier?*



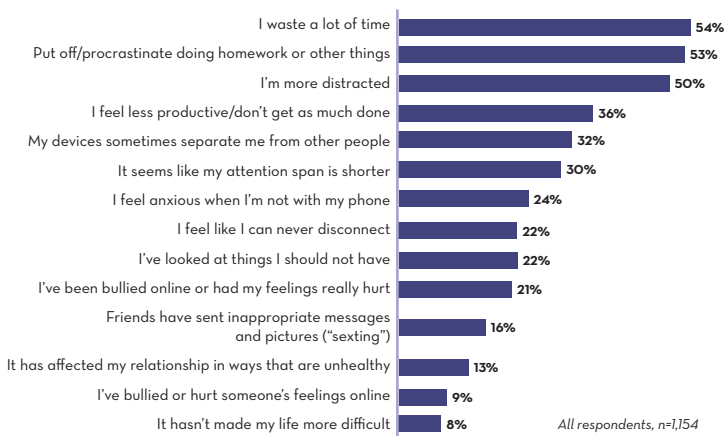
My parents thought a lot about this when Timothy and I were little. How would they teach us to take the good and leave the bad? How could tech serve us without controlling us?

As I mentioned earlier, there wasn't a single answer. Rather, they took a number of small steps. We didn't have a TV while my brother and I were young, and when we eventually got one, we only watched movies together. We never had a video game console, either. We weren't a tech-free family, but the screens we did have belonged to our whole family, and we arranged our house so they didn't take over our living space.

Among other things, being part of a tech-wise family meant I didn't have a smartphone until high school, although I could use a computer and an iPod. I never played video games, although my brother ended up playing Wii occasionally at friends' houses. I also didn't have any social media until I was about fifteen, despite my fifth-grade friends urging me to get



*In what ways has technology actually made your life more difficult?*



on Facebook (more about that later). While my classmates started to discover social media in elementary school, it wasn't part of my life for years.

Maybe you know what this is like; I've met a few friends whose parents had similar views on tech and social media. But this might sound strange to you—maybe really awful. Maybe you've had great experiences online and think I truly missed out. Maybe you're just confused. What did I do with my time? And maybe you're wondering if I'll start telling you to delete all your online accounts and throw your phone off the nearest cliff.

Well, I understand that confusion. Ever since my friends started to discover technology, I've had to explain my family's

weird choices to people. I know these choices seem puzzling, maybe even pointless. But I hope that by sharing some pieces of my life, I might help you start to think about the role technology plays in yours. Living wisely with technology isn't one-size-fits-all; you have to do some self-searching to discover how tech will tempt you and how tech will help you.

So, while parts of my story might seem baffling at times, I hope that reading it can help you to take charge of the screens in your life. I hope you can clear away any static that technology might bring and learn to listen to your family and friends more deeply. I hope you'll discover what tech-wise means for you.



If you're pitying me for my low-tech childhood, you're not alone. When people hear about my strange family, they often worry that I missed out on television and video games and the internet. But actually, I'm struck by what I don't remember. I don't remember feeling embarrassed because I had no Instagram, or lonely because I couldn't Snap my friends. I certainly noticed that my family was unusual, but I can't find any painful memories relating to it. My friends were sometimes confused as to why I couldn't just join Facebook, but my absence from social media wasn't really a problem.

But as I grew up, I couldn't rely only on my parents' instructions. I had to figure out for myself what my tech-wise life would mean. And I can assure you that I made some mistakes

along the way, which brings us back to me crying in my bedroom over Instagram.

Technology promises so much—to connect us, to save our memories, to keep us entertained. And it often delivers on these promises.

Yet it also fails.

If you've felt disheartened or disconnected by technology, you're not alone. In fact, teens who use technology a lot are more likely to say that they don't have someone to turn to for help (20 percent among high users versus 14 percent among others). Our devices aren't helping everyone connect, and they aren't making everyone happy.

In my experience, social media is one of the biggest examples of this. Its promise to help us document and share our lives is true—but it can also bring pain.

The thing is, when we try to document our lives, we start to notice that our lives are not always the best documentary material. (Some people avoid this conclusion. Their stories take five minutes to tap through and give us plentiful information about their bus ride or second cousin's third birthday. But they're rare.)

Our lives aren't always camera-ready. They're full of dreary, ordinary moments we don't especially want to remember twenty years from now, moments of exhaustion and sadness and frustration. By the standards of social media, our lives are pretty poor.

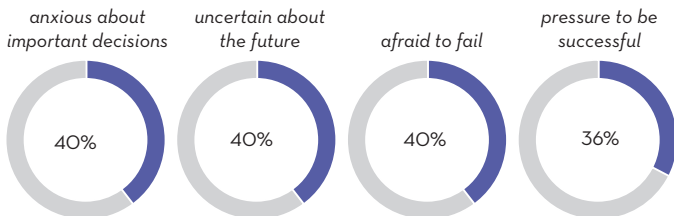
Maybe you're not too worried about how you appear on social media. I'm so glad of that. But everyone I've ever met is worried about something. We're one of the most anxious generations to date; we fear uncertain futures, worry about our present lives, and regret the past.

Again and again in our lives, we'll be overwhelmed by these anxieties and insecurities. Maybe it'll be from social media's false standards, which tell us we're not entertaining enough to be worthy. Or maybe it won't be from technology at all. But even if the source of our fear isn't technology, our devices can make it worse; in our darkest moments, our phones will nag us with constant reminders that everyone else seems to be doing way better.

So, what do we do about this? What do we do when these seemingly tiny moments tear open our scars?

Well, tech promises plenty of ways to help. The internet is a quick source of comfort. We can soothe ourselves by watching

### I Often Feel . . .



\*From the Barna report *The Connection Generation*. n=15,369 adults ages 18-35, December 4-February 15, 2019



It's clear that the comparison game is strong on social media—and brings with it both competition and insecurity. Not to mention exhaustion. More than half of respondents (51%) in the Barna survey of Americans ages 13–21 admit that sometimes it's exhausting to keep up with all the posts online. Even so, most people are grateful for all that info—nearly three quarters of respondents (72%) say technology has made their life easier because it gives them access to so much information. And while technology often gets a bad rap for separating us from other people, another frequently chosen reason (64%) tech makes life easier is by helping people feel closer to friends and family. On the flip side, no small percentage (32%) say the opposite: a difficulty they have with technology is the way it separates them from other people. In general, respondents feel more positively than negatively toward the effects of technology on their lives—but are aware that the benefits come at a cost.

someone seem even stupider and weaker than us; we can text friends; we can read over admiring comments on social media.

And this is what I tried first when I saw those photos. I texted my friends right away: “I’m just looking through all these photos, and I hate all of them. I wish I had never taken any pics.” They responded quickly with love and support, telling me “You look happy and gorgeous!” and suggesting that I post to social media—“Then you’ll get likes and stuff and feel validated.” But even though my friends meant well, seeing their

words on my phone screen wasn't enough. I was still sitting alone in my room on my phone. I wasn't comforted.

I also tried the endless stream of entertainment available on my phone; I scrolled through Instagram, watched cooking videos on YouTube, played a few games, listened to music. But entertainment only distracted me from my pain. I wasn't healed.

Here's what I hope we can commit to: when our daily troubles and lurking fears overwhelm us, let's not turn to tech.

You and I—we are broken, ragged people. We can't be healed by technology's seamless flow. We need fellowship with our broken, ragged friends.

Sharing with others sometimes feels impossible. It takes courage and vulnerability to confess our self-doubts, and it's so much easier to put on a confident face and lie. And yet the only way to find peace from our insecurities is through community.



Eventually I realized tech couldn't fix me. So I sent my youth pastor, Bethany, a text for help. I didn't say much, I just told her I was having a hard time and needed some love. We went to dinner together, and I told her about what had engulfed me, about the dark, cold place those photos had plunged me into. She embraced me, she prayed with me, and she told me about the bad photos of her own she had cringed over and the scars her self-doubts had left. We talked and wept and broke bread together.

And at some beautifully invisible moment, we both just started to laugh. We laughed because we suddenly saw the smallness of these insecurities; even the very worst pain our doubts put us through was nothing compared to the light and love of God. Three hours after I had been sobbing on my bed, broken by my ugly insecurities, I went home with a joyful heart full of the peace of community.

Please don't let self-doubt paralyze you. When you hate the skin you're in, don't gloss over it—share in person. Pray with your friends or your family. Cry together, laugh together, and remember who you truly are. This is the relief you cannot get from kind texts or viral videos or games. It's the relief you feel when you bare your wounds to someone else, and they reach out to embrace you.

Through love, not tech, we will find peace.

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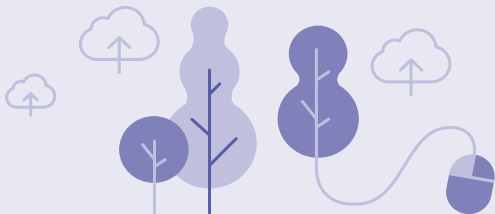
## WHAT TO DO NEXT

### *Practices for Your Tech-Wise Life*

- » Typically, I'll use this section to give you simple, practical tips you can use right away. But the first step to being tech-wise is to think. Think about your relationship with tech. When does tech bring you joy? When does it make you anxious? What would you like to change? These questions will help you figure out where you need to take action.

- » We can't be tech-wise alone. So, next, have an honest conversation with your friends or family about tech. Our use of devices has been too often shown to contribute to insecurity, anxiety, and a host of other problems. Ask questions. Listen to each other's stories. Think about the different ways you can all work on your relationship with technology.
  - » But as much as I hope you use screens more wisely, that's not the ultimate goal. I talked in this chapter about how screens aren't the fundamental problem; they make our other struggles and fears worse. So I want you to look beyond screens.
  - » I hope you can identify the people you can turn to for help, whether it's tech-related or not. Have you been struggling on your own without asking for support? I promise it'll be a relief to share what's hurting you.
  - » On this note, pay attention to your friends. It's easy for us to get lost in our own troubles, but we're surrounded by other people who need help. Think about how you can encourage each person you love, even when they seem to be doing fine. Offer yourself as a listener. Be the kind of friend you need.
- .....





## *Dear Amy,*

Wow. Well, if your goal was to make me cry with the first chapter, you succeeded.

I have to admit this was so hard to read. I've never for a moment seen you as anything other than beautiful. It's painful to realize you were so distraught about how you looked to others, and maybe above all to yourself. It's wrenching to know that technology amplified all that insecurity, in spite of everything our family did to limit its effects, and that you had to bear all that alone in your room.

You are so right, though, that insecurities don't start with technology.

I think about the very first book of the Bible, Genesis, the book of beginnings. Almost every major character in it is anxious about where they fit in the world and how others see them. There's Jacob and Esau wrestling in the womb for who will be the firstborn, and Jacob scheming to cheat his brother out of his father's blessing. Before that there is Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Abram's wife Sarai, who bears Abram a son when Sarai cannot and then is cast into the wilderness with

her child because of Sarai's jealousy and rage. I suppose the story goes all the way back to the first two brothers, and Cain's murderous fury when God favored his brother Abel's sacrifices over his. Maybe the story goes back further still.

And I remember my own teenage years. I was skinny and had glasses, frequently terrible acne, and not the greatest fashion sense. On the other hand, I was good at school, good at music, and far, far too sure of myself in ways that would surely have driven my friends crazy if they hadn't been living out their own personal dramas. So I swung wildly back and forth between elated overconfidence on the good days and utter despair that I would ever be really accepted and known on the bad days.

This is just part of growing up. It's not the fun part. But it is essential. Somehow I think even the stories in Genesis are essential in that way—they show God's people, the children of Abraham and Sarah, coming to terms with who they really are. On the one hand they've been singled out as the people God is going to use to bless the whole world. That ought to give them a sense of security and purpose. But they keep acting in ways that undermine the whole thing, putting themselves and others to shame.

And though their foolishness wasn't broadcast in real time the way some of our worst moments can be today, it was somehow all remembered and recorded,

told and retold until it ended up in the Bible. Imagine having your meanest, pettiest, ugliest day, or the day of your greatest humiliation and shame, put in the pages of the bestselling book in history! It happened to Sarai and to Hagar and her baby; it happened to Jacob's sons and to their annoying younger brother Joseph. We remember them today most vividly by some of their worst moments.

As people say: awkward.

And yet, those stories are there because they are part of a larger story of rescue. One of the most amazing moments in Genesis is during the first time Hagar flees into the desert to escape Sarai's abuse. She meets an angel of the Lord, who tells her to name her son Ishmael, which means, "God hears." And in response she coins a name for God, "You are the God who sees me" (Gen. 16:13 NIV). Hagar—who isn't even part of the chosen family, who has every reason to doubt that anyone cares about her—actually comes to believe that God sees and hears her.

And when Joseph finally meets his foolish brothers who'd trafficked him into slavery near the end of Genesis, he is able to say, "You meant it for evil. But God meant it for good." Then they weep, embrace, and the brothers go home to tell their father.

I'm so glad your terrible Instagram weekend ended that way too, with a rescue: dinner with Bethany that started with tears and ended with laughter. It's really

striking that though the shame and pain could happen when you were all by yourself with just a screen, the rescue had to happen with someone else, in a real place, no screens involved.

As your dad, I wish I could have spared you the pain of insecurity and the moments of pain that are still ahead. But I'm not sure that's actually a proper or godly wish—because it doesn't seem to be what God chooses even for his own people, or for that matter his own Son. If I had somehow been able to protect you from all of that, you wouldn't ever have experienced rescue: being saved from your worst fears, and the worst of yourself, by someone who understood and loved you.

I think this is the real way out of insecurity: not actually being protected from it in the first place but being rescued from it by love. Once that's happened, we can never be quite as insecure again.

*Love,  
Dad*