



print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS

Ah, sun, sand, and arguing over the damn PDA

SUSAN PINKER

spinker@globeandmail.com

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Dear Susan,

My partner is a wonderful wife and mother who is also a professional addicted to her BlackBerry. She e-mails, text messages and takes calls while we're out with friends and while she's doing homework with the kids. Now we're about to take a family holiday and I dread the idea of the BlackBerry at the beach in New Jersey. When I've brought up the issue with her, she says she has no choice - it goes with her job's territory. Should I ban the BlackBerry before we go?

- *Second Fiddle*

Print Edition - Section Front



Dear Fiddle,

You can try, but you won't get anywhere unless your wife agrees to go cold turkey. To quote that old joke: How many therapists does it take to change a light bulb? Just one, but she has to want to change. Is that true of your honey?

Being tethered to a personal digital assistant (PDA) can be viewed two ways.

First, it's a way for your employer to have you exactly when he or she wants you. A few years ago, my husband received a BlackBerry from his employer as a gift on Christmas eve. The sight of him checking e-mail in his socks at midnight that night is the memory of a gift that keeps on giving - and taking.

Paradoxically, it gave him freedom while taking away his free time: He was free to roam a fair distance from his office on holidays and weekends - but as long as that black box was nearby he was never truly off duty.

The second vantage point is that being constantly connected is also a way to feel alive. High-tech blogger Linda Stone has coined the term continuous partial attention, CPA for short, for the relationship we have with our mobile devices.

Unlike multitasking, during which you manage one activity on autopilot while another task demands your full attention (like driving the car while arguing with a passenger), while in CPA mode you're ostensibly engaged with the task at hand, yet constantly scanning the horizon for the next new opportunity.

It's a question of toggling your attention from your present, real-time experience to any novel and intriguing possibility emanating from the little black box. That vigilance, that openness to new experiences is as invigorating as it is addictive.

It's also the opposite of truly letting go: Bringing your BlackBerry to the beach may bring on what work-life coach Joe Robinson calls "vacation deficit disorder."

There's the fact that, while your partner thumbs her BlackBerry, her CPA is just that: She's only partly engaged with you.

As McLean Mashingaidze-Greaves, a Toronto based new-media entrepreneur and long-term heavy PDA user admitted to me (via his BlackBerry): "While it's great to have the Internet in your pocket, it's socially regressive in some ways. Like a lot of people, I sometimes use the device to avoid talking to people and to manage boredom."

There's no consensus among experts about whether being continuously, though partly, engaged is a good or a bad thing.

Ray Kurzweil, an American futurist and inventor - who created a popular music synthesizer in the eighties, the first "reading machines" to translate text into speech, and the first flat-bed scanners - reminded me of the importance of choice when it comes to our communication devices.

"I don't believe that being online all the time increases stress. We now have the freedom to choose our communities based on common interests and shared values. In times past, we were limited to provincial communities based on the accident of geography. There was plenty of stress in those apparently placid small towns," he wrote in an e-mail to me.

How and where one chooses to whip out a BlackBerry on a family holiday is much like negotiating any boundary in a human relationship. The perception of personal autonomy is key. One spouse might see the PDA as the reason she can take a holiday in the first place, while the other regards it as the only obstacle to the family enjoying that holiday. When there are two conflicting vantage points, issuing edicts is unlikely to get you very far.

After all, it's not the object per se that's the problem. Rather this is about the willingness of any twosome to broach a conflict with their common interests in mind.

For this year, that may mean suggesting the possibility of limiting PDA use to certain hours or certain places. For next year that may mean finding a beach where, for better or worse, there's no cell tower in sight.

Dear Susan,

I became pregnant toward the end of my professional degree program when most other students were taking paid, entry-level internships. Now my child is almost a year old and I'm applying for jobs. Although I have solid references and a competitive résumé and even managed to get some volunteer experience in my field, I was essentially parenting full-time over the past year. How should I handle the gap on my résumé? It seems unprofessional, not to mention a liability, to refer to a child, but I can't think of another way to approach this. What do you suggest?

- *Have Baby, Will Work*

Dear Have Baby,

The respectability of the phrase "maternity leave" says it all. There is nothing unprofessional about taking a year off from paid work to care for a newborn.

Only a society that sees its citizens as undifferentiated work units whose paycheques are their only measure of worth (trumping health, robust child development, personal happiness, and a population's ability to replace itself and survive) would subscribe to the idea that a year spent with a baby is a year of wasted time.

If that stark vision reflected the values of Western democracies, then Canada, Australia, Britain, Germany, Spain, Norway, Portugal and Sweden would be throwing a nice chunk of their GNPs to the wind. They're just a few of the countries that require employers to offer women at least a year of maternity leave, thus protecting their jobs and incomes while they're away from the work force.

And Canada is one of the leaders of the pack, spending \$2.7-billion a year in employment benefits so that parents can spend up to a year at home with their babies, according to Statistics Canada. (That doesn't include more generous benefits package offered in Quebec, which has its own maternity leave program.)

Meanwhile, Germany and Italy are just two of several European countries that bestow cash bonuses of up to 10,000 euros (\$15,900) onto mothers the minute their babies are born, and follow up with generous monthly stipends until their children reach adulthood. It seems that fostering the next generation is worth quite a lot.

Even if individual employers are more shortsighted, discriminating against a woman because she's been on maternity leave is illegal. So it's okay to be straightforward about what you've been doing over the past year. Include details about your volunteer work and how the skills and relationships you developed there and at home translate to the jobs you're targeting. For example, describe any networking opportunities that surfaced while you were pushing a stroller around town.

Business opportunities can spring up in un-businesslike environments. The children's school playground and neighbourhood stumping grounds are where New Yorker writers Caitlin Flanagan and Adam Gopnik, respectively, first met their editors and got their story ideas.

Just because you're away from an office doesn't mean your brain is switched off. In fact, it could be the reverse, as recent evidence tells us that motherhood makes mammals smarter.

Research by Craig Kinsley and Kelly Lambert at the University of Richmond in Virginia shows that young female rats that had just had pups (or had just been given foster pups) were better able to run mazes and find hidden food than rats with no newborns around. The presence of young ones boosted their spatial problem solving - and the advantage was permanent.

So the phrase "maternity leave" doesn't mean you've taken leave of your senses. It just means that you briefly left one type of rat race to score IQ points in another.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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