



ARE WE LOSING OUR HUMANITY?

By Pheona Croom-Johnson

In a world increasingly mediated by screens, algorithms and automation, it is easy to forget that behind every email, customer service call, or social media comment is a real human being. The way we interact with one another has changed dramatically, especially in the wake of remote and hybrid working, post-pandemic social shifts and the rise of digital communication. The question we must ask ourselves is: ***are we remembering our humanity?***

The Rise of Digital Detachment Syndrome (DDS)

Before the digital era, most of our interactions occurred face-to-face. Whether it was in the workplace, at the store, or in a service-based role, communication was personal. Body language, tone of voice and real-time feedback/feedforward gave us the opportunity to gauge reactions and adjust our approach accordingly. Some of us became really good at recognising other people's signals. However, as work has moved to remote settings, remote connection that has lost some of its 'relational components' and instead has become much more transactional. Social interactions are increasingly virtual and customer service has leaned heavily on automation, something essential has been lost: ***humanity in communication.***

Pause for a moment –
How has your life now
changed in this rise of DDS?



This phenomenon we, here at Sandown Business School, are describing as “**Digital Detachment Syndrome**” (DDS). This term captures the emotional disconnection, the reduction of empathetic connection and the increase in impersonal communication that has arisen from the dominance of digital interactions. DDS results in impatience, misinterpretation of intent and an increasing tendency to treat people as transactional entities rather than individuals with emotions and experiences.

The Consequences of Emotional Detachment

Customer service provides a clear example of how digital detachment is affecting our interactions. Many people have experienced the frustration of automated menus, scripted responses, or the inability to connect with a real human representative. However, this shift is not confined to customer service, it is a broader phenomenon impacting communication across social media, email and virtual meetings.

These digital interactions often embolden people to communicate in ways they never would face-to-face. Research in psycholinguistics and social psychology suggests that the absence of nonverbal cues in digital communication increases negativity bias, making people more likely to misinterpret neutral messages as hostile or dismissive (Kiesler et al., 1984 and Byron, 2008).

Think of recent interactions where you have become agitated more quickly - whereas in the past you would have remained calm and in control? Why are you more agitated?



Yet, this behaviour is not just a byproduct of digital convenience, it signals a deeper issue: **emotional dysregulation** and a **growing disconnection** from our shared humanity. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that some degree of detachment can be an adaptive coping mechanism, particularly in high-stress environments. While excessive emotional disconnection may lead to impatience, rudeness and a loss of empathy, moderate detachment can serve as a protective mechanism against burnout. A condition that is a clear sign of our times?

Recognising the Signs of Digital Detachment Syndrome

To rebuild authentic, respectful communication, we must first recognise our own tendencies toward dysregulation. There are certain behavioural markers that reveal how our communication is shifting away from warmth and empathy and as you read through - consider how many could be your behavioural markers of DDS?



Impatience:

Quick escalations in tone, demanding instant solutions. This is so true! I notice if I have to wait more than 5 rings for a business to answer the phone, I start to create a story about their professionalism! A colleague of mine often gets 'hurt' if their WhatsApp message is not instantly replied to.



Challenge yourself:

Try observing your impatience in daily interactions, what triggers it?



Shortened Responses:

Emails and messages becoming curt and transactional, often without basic pleasantries. How often do you start with just the name of the person you are emailing? Is there a beginning 'human connection' to the email? Or is your style to simply be direct and get straight into your reason for sending the email? Ask yourself – how does that approach/style edify relationships?



Try this:

For a day, add a warm opening to every email and see if the tone of responses change.



Assumption of Intent:

Interpreting neutral messages as hostile due to lack of tone and body language. And this is so easy to do! How often have you read an email and got upset by what you think it says – only to find out you have made up a story about what you thought it said rather than what it actually said! I have noticed I can read emails on my phone or computer and pick up a different tone! The same email but the tone appears different when I can see the whole message via my computer rather than on the small screen of my phone! I was so pleased to catch this!



Tip:

Read emails on different devices before reacting—your perspective might shift!

Double Tip:

Change the 'reaction' to a 'response' and again notice the difference in your energy centre.



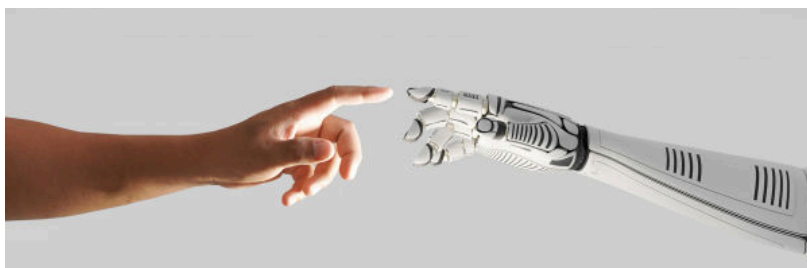
Entitlement Over Empathy:

There is a growing expectation that service providers should resolve issues instantly, often disregarding human limitations. Instead of approaching interactions with patience and understanding, many have become adept at demanding what they believe they should receive rather than considering what is realistically possible. I once heard someone proudly share that they made it their mission to exploit even the smallest inconvenience, pressuring service representatives until they secured extra compensation. Their strategy? Making the other person uncomfortable enough to concede. It is an interesting approach, one that reflects a broader cultural shift where assertiveness sometimes crosses into manipulation, often at the expense of basic human empathy.



Reflect:

The next time you are frustrated with any kind of service or human interaction, ask yourself: Am I treating them as a person or just a function?





Public Shaming: The Fear of Speaking Honestly

Social media has become a battleground where mistakes are not just pointed out but amplified, often escalating conflict rather than resolving it. This is a vast and complex issue, one that could fill countless discussions. But what has this environment done to our ability to express ourselves honestly? More and more, I hear people say they hesitate to share their thoughts openly, worried about how their words might be weaponised against them. The fear of being "cancelled" looms large, creating a chilling effect that stifles open dialogue. This phenomenon doesn't just impact individual expression; it threatens one of our most fundamental rights (and even values) the ability to think, learn and evolve through conversation without the constant fear of public backlash.



Try this:

Next time you disagree online, engage with curiosity rather than attack.



Emotional Detachment:

Modern society moves at an ever-increasing speed, favouring efficiency over depth, quick fixes over genuine connection. In this fast-paced world, interactions are often reduced to transactions, people are seen as the roles they occupy rather than the individuals they are. Whether it's the customer service representative, the delivery driver, or the person responding to an email, we engage with them as functions, not as humans with their own emotions, challenges and complexities. The rise of digital communication exacerbates this, making it easier to depersonalise interactions. When we prioritise results over relationships, we lose the warmth and understanding that define human connection.



Ask yourself:

Do I see the person behind the role, or am I just looking for the quickest resolution?

While these behaviours can be signs of disconnection, they may also stem from genuine frustration. Distinguishing between emotional dysregulation and valid dissatisfaction is key to improving the way we communicate.



How do we build internal psychological safety?!

Six Psychological Strategies for Building Internal Safety

Instead of depending on external validation or flawless service interactions to dictate our emotions, we can develop an internal sense of safety and self-regulation. By grounding ourselves emotionally, we gain the ability to respond to challenges with patience and understanding rather than frustration and reactivity. To support this process, we can draw from psychological and neuroscience-based strategies to strengthen self-regulation and enhance relational intelligence. Here are six psychological techniques to help cultivate that internal sense of safety:-



Mindful Awareness: Take a moment before responding to notice your emotional state. Are you frustrated? Irritated? Breathe before engaging. (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).



Reframing the Narrative: Assume positive intent. Most people are trying their best, even when it doesn't seem that way.



Personal Check-Ins: Ask yourself, Would I speak this way if I were in the room with this person? If not, adjust.



Regulated Responses: Use a softer tone in writing. Simple changes like "I understand" or "I appreciate your time" can shift the dynamic.



Boundary Setting: If a conversation is escalating, step away and return when you feel centred. (Gabor Maté, 2010).



Compassion Practice: Imagine the person on the other end as someone you care about. Would you want your words to be the last thing they read on a bad day?

Six Neuroscientific Strategies for Self-Regulation

Another way of keeping ourselves psychologically safe is to recognise our nervous system plays a crucial role in how we engage with others. Polyvagal Theory, developed by Dr. Stephen Porges, suggests that our ability to communicate effectively depends on how regulated our autonomic nervous system is. While widely accepted in some circles, it remains an evolving framework requiring further empirical validation. Here are six ways to support your nervous system:



Breathwork: Slow, deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, signalling safety to the brain. (Porges, 2011).



Grounding Exercises: Engage your senses, notice five things you see, four things you hear, three things you feel, to bring yourself into the present moment.



Vocal Toning: Humming or speaking in a warm, steady tone can help regulate the vagus nerve and reduce reactivity.



Body Awareness: Notice tension in your shoulders, jaw, or hands. Relax these areas to reduce overall stress.



Co-Regulation Practices: Engage with safe, warm interactions in daily life, such as small talk with a barista or a friendly email.



Self-Soothing Rituals: A cup of tea, a short walk, or listening to calming music can create a sense of stability and reduce reactionary responses.

Conclusion: Remembering Our Shared Humanity

It is important to remember - we are all humans navigating a world that is increasingly complex. While most people do not set out to do a bad job, external pressures, stress and systemic issues can affect performance.

If we can collectively shift towards patience, kindness and emotional regulation, we won't just improve our daily interactions, ***we will create a more compassionate world.***

The next time you send an email, make a phone call, or post a comment, pause. Ask yourself: Am I speaking as a human to another human? Because in the end, that is what truly matters - isn't it?



References:

- Kiesler, S., Siegel, J., & McGuire, T. W. (1984). Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication. *American Psychologist*, 39(10), 1123-1134. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.39.10.1123>
- Byron, K. (2008). Carrying Too Heavy a Load? The Communication and Miscommunication of Emotion by Email. *Academy of Management Review*, 33(2), 309-327. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2008.31193163>
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. New York: Hyperion.
- Maté, G. (2010). *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Porges, S. W. (2011). *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.



Pheona Croom-Johnson is Co-Founder and Academic Director of Sandown Business School. She has been in the OD field for over 35 years, partnering with Coaches, C-Suite and Senior Leaders. Pheona is a triple credentialed Master Coach (ICF, EMCC, AC), Master NLP Trainer, Team Coach Supervisor (ACTC, ICF) and credentialed Supervisor (ESIA, EMCC), IFS Trained therapist (Level 1) with psychological foundations and training (BPS). She has an MA in Psychological Coaching and an MSc in Psychology of Change Agency. Get in touch to find out more about coaching, leadership and/or supervision.

If you are interested in discovering more send us a DM with your company email and we'll send you details and information on our **free E-Book "5 Pillars of Excellence - How to Stay Ahead"**.

If you would like to read backdated articles and/or believe someone else would find our articles useful - check out our website

We would be delighted to provide a PDF copy upon request. If you wish to share this Article.