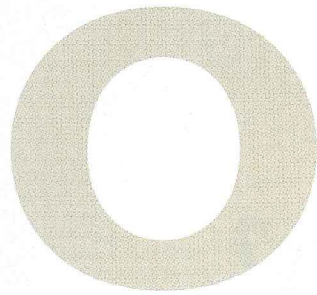


Cell Phone Syndrome: A Manifestation of Autophobia?



One of my favorite ruminations in quiet moments in my car or while walking on urban sidewalks is to imagine what urgency there must be to the cell phone call of the person in front of me. I would estimate that fully a quarter of drivers, and maybe slightly

fewer walkers, are on the phone at any given time. Some of them are discoverable from their wild gesticulations and mouth movements (not in time with music) as they talk into their hands-free device. Others appear to have severe torticollis, which may alternate sides during observation. Still others are gesticulating with one hand, holding the phone in the other and (presumably) steering with their knees. What is it that cannot wait until they get to where they are going?

Doing the math, if that many people are on the phone as I observe them, and maybe half the people I observe are like me (on the cell phone only 2 percent of their time on the road or sidewalk), that means that the remainder are spending half their time while driving or walking on their cell phones! It's these people who fall in the diagnostic category of Cell Phone syndrome. Of course there are subtypes:

1. The busy executive. This is the person (gender is not protective) who checks in with the office so often that the secretary is unable to get any other work done. Generally, people leaving messages do not expect to be called back in milliseconds.

2. The teenager. These people must have parents who buy "all you can talk" contracts with the cell phone companies. I find it difficult to think of anything to say in response to "What's happening?" when I have divulged everything that is happening not five minutes previously. "A bee flew by" or "It just started to rain" might suffice if I were more creative. But, I admit, I'm not a teenager anymore.

3. The busy "mom" (whichever gender). This is a category of users for whom I have sympathy. Stretched in every direction, the mom finds the cell phone a godsend for communication with the brood. But beyond reporting GPS position and ETA, it must be bonding that takes so long on the phone.

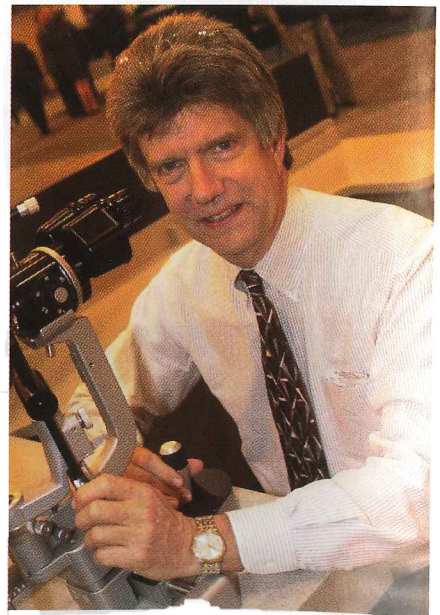
4. The illicit dealer. Mostly, these conversations are essential, though brief, so they don't count.

5. The inadvertent user. These are the people who forget to turn the cell phone off and are jarringly reminded of their connectivity. They fumble for the phone, curse to the atmosphere and sulk off to the nearest cul-de-sac, window or bathroom to conduct their business. Also brief, and they don't count either.

Common to the mainstream of those afflicted with Cell Phone syndrome (groups 1 to 3) is a need to feel needed. They are seeking validation of their worth, affirmation of their connectivity with others and, consequentially, abdication of their autophobia.* These folks are horrified of being left alone, and they spend their free time connecting with others.

Which makes me ruminate in my quiet time as I drive or walk, I must be missing something important about constant connectivity. Perhaps I too could achieve cell phone fulfillment. But I'd sacrifice my quiet time.

**An irrational fear of being alone. Also known as eremophobia or monophobia.*



RICHARD P. MILLS, MD, MPH
SEATTLE