

Is convenience making our lives more difficult?

Everything is easier with modern technology—except fulfilling your true potential

Alex Curmi, *The Guardian*, 4 November, 2024

The convenience of modern life is nothing short of astounding. As I write this, my phone is wirelessly sending some of the greatest hits from the 1700s (Bach, if you must know) to my portable speaker. I could use that same device to, within moments, get a car to pick me up, have food delivered to my house, or start chatting with someone on a dating app. [...]

5 The fact that, as a culture, we seek out and celebrate such short cuts is understandable. They take much of the tedium out of life, make it easier to have fun, and save us time and energy. That said, most people are able to intuit that convenience has a darker side. [...]

We've bent technology and our environments at least partly to serve our natural instinct to conserve energy. The question is: what do we stand to lose by following our inclination to prioritise
10 comfort and convenience? Few people would argue with the fact that, say, washing machines, trains and telephones have freed us to lead more fulfilling and creative lives. As I said at the beginning, more advanced technologies undoubtedly have their pleasures and opportunities, too. But there's evidence to suggest that contemporary hyper-convenience can also make our lives more, not less, difficult.

15 Take, for example, the increase in depression and anxiety that some have linked to smartphones and social media. Likewise, the explosion of metabolic problems over the past several decades that can be directly attributed to sedentary lifestyles and a reliance on convenient, calorie-dense but nutrient-poor food. Levels of loneliness have become sufficiently problematic that the UK has had a
20 "minister for loneliness" since 2018. Such loneliness, it could be argued, would simply not be possible without the technologies, from comms to home entertainment, that allow people to live such separate lives in the first place.

In my work as a psychotherapist, I have seen how leaning too hard on a coping mechanism can amplify the problem it was meant to alleviate. The sense of safety you get from staying home can make it more anxiety-inducing to go out later. The relief of avoiding an uncomfortable conversation
25 with your spouse makes that conversation even harder to have subsequently. Using a dating app to avoid the awkwardness of flirting only weakens your social skills over time. Continually choosing the convenient path lessens your ability to deal with unavoidable difficulties. And, from an evolutionary perspective, some measure of discomfort is just as crucial to our survival as rest and relaxation. [...]

30 Modern hyper-convenience is a kind of deal with the devil. It is seductive because it appeals to our instincts, but it surreptitiously depletes us. It has made it easier to get by, but in many ways harder to truly succeed. Human flourishing and happiness is not just about subsistence, but also depends on growth, dynamic problem-solving, and solidarity through hardship.

Much of my work with my younger clients has been focused not on deep psychological conflict or
35 the impact of trauma, but on approaching the basic tasks of living, such as making friends, handling work stress, or going to new places. What they tell me repeatedly is that the discomfort of such tasks feels overwhelming, and their worlds are shrinking in consequence.

Ideally, today's conveniences should serve as the support systems that help us move towards worthwhile goals, be they exercising for better health, building a career, raising a family, making a
40 work of art, or teaching and mentoring others. Meeting these goals always involves some kind of inconvenience, but it is this difficulty itself that shapes and develops our character.

In the technological world we have fashioned, we must sometimes make a conscious effort to act in opposition to our instincts. As a culture, we must remember—and remind our young people—that while convenience feels good in the moment, our capacity to adapt and overcome challenges is
45 part of our evolutionary heritage too, and central to the adventure of life.

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