



DIRECTORATE OF PREVENTION, RESILIENCE AND READINESS

Connect, Don't Disconnect: Improving Our Offline Relationships Through AI and Technology By Antonieta Rico, Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, as we faced lockdowns, quarantine and social distancing, we turned to technology to save us from isolation. We went to online concerts, happy hours and dance hangouts, had virtual birthday parties, and even went on virtual dates. These activities—when we intentionally used technology to sustain and enhance our real-life relationships—seemed to fade with the return to “normal” life.

“It was a cultural point where we needed a solution to being together,” said Caitlin Krause, author of *Digital Wellbeing: Empowering Connection With Wonder and Imagination in the Age of AI*, founder of the consultancy MindWise and a lecturer at Stanford University. “Now that we have a certain amount of freedom again, people might be attached to thinking of those digital systems to socially connect ... as part of an emotionally heavy past.”

Some of us returned to using technology primarily in isolating or energy-draining ways. We mindlessly scroll our social media for hours, binge-watch shows all weekend from our couch and seek companionship from AI chatbots, whose use has doubled from 2023 to 2025, according to Pew Research Center. Meanwhile, we're letting our real-life connections falter.

In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General declared loneliness an epidemic, warning in an advisory that “loneliness and isolation represent profound threats to our health and well-being.”

People who report being socially isolated and lonely have a greater risk of heart disease, dementia and stroke, according to the Surgeon General's report. Day-to-day, separate research led by UCLA and the University of Houston have found that lonely people have a weaker immune system, report feeling sicker when they catch a cold and may take longer to recover. A 2010 landmark study on loneliness and isolation by Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad and fellow researchers found that loneliness increases the risk of early death in an amount comparable to being a smoker or being obese.

The impact of loneliness extends beyond the individual. At work, connection affects readiness and performance, retention and burnout, and organizational culture and trust, Krause said. “Connection is not a ‘soft’ issue—it's a core driver of mental health, resilience, decision quality and a person's sense of meaning,” Krause emphasized. “When people are chronically disconnected, we see downstream impacts on mood, sleep, stress and the ability to cope under pressure.”

For years, the military has understood that optimal service member well-being and performance relies on a holistic set of factors that include social connection. In 2009 it codified those factors as the [Total Force Fitness](#) framework. The framework consists of eight domains, one of which is [Social Fitness](#). At around the same time, the Army incorporated that understanding in its own [Ready and Resilient](#) program, which contains [five dimensions, including the Social Dimension](#).

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A service member's job is hard—the long hours, training and deployments represent a unique set of stressors unlike any other occupation, said Dr. Lauren Messina, Senior Scientist at the Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine, Inc., currently supporting the Consortium for Health and Military Performance.

“That heightened level of stress that service members endure positions them to need more support... They need things that will help buffer the impact of that stress, and so social connection becomes this thing that really can help service members endure,” she said.

As part of the CHAMP team, Messina is a social fitness expert who focuses on relationship health and team cohesion in order to optimize the performance of service members.

“We know that if Soldiers report feeling good connections with their unit and that they feel seen and heard by their Family members, those Soldiers feel happier,” Messina said. “And service members who enjoy strong connections with people perform better in their jobs and they live happier, healthier, longer lives.”

But on the flip side, they are also prone to the potential negative effects of social isolation, said Messina. Training, deployments and permanent changes of station can work against them when trying to strengthen connection, she said. And so can technology.

In the 2024 survey *Loneliness in America: Just the Tip of the Iceberg*, 73% of those surveyed blamed technology for contributing to their loneliness.

“Sometimes people default to tech that is more of a division than a bridge because isolating tech can often appear easier or more convenient in the short term. It's lower effort, less vulnerable and instantly rewarding,” Krause said. “On top of that, many platforms are designed around engagement and attention capture, not depth, reflection, repair or relationship quality.”

But technology is here to stay and it is only poised to become more integrated in our lives, Krause said. If we approach it with a “human first” mindset and intentionality, she believes technology can serve as a bridge for greater social connection instead of the opposite.

“I define well-being as the alignment of your intention and your attention,” said Krause. “If (people) want to spend two hours on social media, then if they spend two hours or less on social media, that's fine—as long as they said that was their intention and they didn't get hijacked by some practices in social media that can be addictive.”

Krause has described the way people use technology as either “supportive” or “substitutive.” It can help you deepen your connection with yourself and others or it can end up replacing your real-life connections.

“Supportive tech deepens your understanding and helps you return to life; substitutive tech quietly tries to become the relationship,” she said.

To engage with your technology in a supportive rather than substitutive way, Krause recommends asking yourself two practical questions:

- **“What am I here for?”** That is, before using tech such as social media AI, or set an intention as to why you want to use the technology—whether it is for connection, learning, coordination, creativity or to rest and relax.
- **“How do I feel after?”** That is, after using the tech, check the impact it had on you. Do you have more or less energy, feel more or less anxious, or feel more or less connected?

Depending on the answer to those questions, people can build guardrails to reduce patterns of non-supportive use of technology and “replace them with patterns that strengthen relationships,” Krause said.

“If we don’t set an intention, the device sets one for us,” she said. “When you start with practices (grounded) in well-being, you are not afraid of any new technology. You can adapt and get curious...and still execute your mission.”

Caitlin Krause, founder of MindWise and the author of “Digital Wellbeing: Empowering Connection With Wonder and Imagination in the Age of AI,” developed the following “Do’s and Don’ts” for DPRR so Soldiers, Family members and Army Civilians can use social media, artificial intelligence and other technology in ways that strengthen their social connections.

Social Media

DO

- Use it to activate real connection: Message someone, set up a walk, send a voice note.
- Curate intentionally: Follow what expands you; mute what triggers comparison or agitation.
- Engage with purpose: Use posts/messages to invite conversation and curiosity or strengthen community.

DON'T

- Treat scrolling as your primary substitute for friendship.
- Use it most when you’re emotionally raw unless you have a clear stop point.
- Confuse metrics (likes/responses) with measures of worth or belonging.

Artificial Intelligence

DO

- Use AI as a supportive tool: brainstorming, summarizing, practicing communication, planning. Then bring results back into real life and real relationships.
- Use AI to help you connect: Draft a message, plan a family ritual, gather research, organize an itinerary.

- Keep boundaries explicit: “Give me options and questions; don’t roleplay as a therapist or best friend.”

DON'T

- Give emotional authority to a system that cannot truly care or be accountable.
- Outsource relational work (repair, honesty, courage, accountability) to a chatbot.
- Use AI as your outlet in crisis. Reach out to real people and real support channels.

Phones

DO

- Make a choice to protect high-value moments: meals, reunions, bedtime, in-person conversation conflict repair.
- Make your phone a connector: Call while walking, send short check-ins, share context with photos.
- Add friction: Reduce notifications, limit apps, choose a charging spot away from your bed.

DON'T

- Let notifications set your emotional tempo all day.
- Keep your phone present during in-person conversations where trust matters.
- Use your phone as constant stress relief. It can train dependence.