

Your Laptop or Your Life?

What you are about to read may contain graphic descriptions and disturbing recommendations. Reader discretion is advised.

Within 90 seconds of entering my hotel room at the Baltimore Hilton for a recent conference, I realized that something was wrong: my laptop was missing.

I had clipped my laptop bag to my suitcase, and had checked my bag with the bellman when I arrived early that first morning. When I picked up my bag and went to my room, I saw that it was no longer attached. Despite wanting to kick off my shoes and rest for a bit between sessions, I knew that I was now racing the clock. My cheery cherry laptop contained my presentation for the conference, of course, as well as every other document and contact I need in order for my life and work to function. My laptop also held my precious Firefox bookmarks – all my favorite sites ready to click at a moment’s notice. I’d like to tell you that these included links to Forbes.com, NASDAQ, and detailed instructions for raising well-mannered, mess-free children, but it’s really filled with links to Ted Talks, Entertainment Weekly, and recipes that include both chocolate and peanut butter. How could I ever replace those?

I raced down the hotel hall, pressed the elevator button ten times (do as I say, not as I do) and ran to the bag check room as quickly as my patent leather peep toe platform pumps could carry me. Once I got there, heart pounding, I smiled and told the attendant exactly what happened: my laptop had been attached to my suitcase, and now it was gone. Within three minutes, the team working the overloaded bag check room had found my laptop, and handed it over to me. I am not exaggerating when I say that I felt my life force returning to my soul.

As soon as I had my computer safely in my hand, I noticed two participants from the conference who had been watching the whole exchange. One woman smiled, “We were just commenting on how remarkably calm you were.” The other woman commented, “I wouldn’t have been that relaxed if I thought I had lost my laptop.” I grinned at both of them, trying to appear as unruffled as they believed I was: “Oh, you know,” I quipped, “I realized it wasn’t like it was my kid or something that got lost -- it was just a laptop. It’s not that important.” They politely smiled back at me, probably thinking that I was zen or unmaterialistic or that I have a killer computer back-up system – none of which is true in the least.

But while walking back to the elevator bank, with my laptop case hanging from my sweaty palm, I realized that I was starting to believe my own bull. Losing my computer would have stunk – big time – but it wasn’t the most important thing in the world.

Here's the rub: I often act like it is.

Whether it's my laptop or my iPhone, too often I pay more attention to my technology than to my family. I tend to treat my toys with more tenderness than I give my kids. And I know that, after the kids are asleep, my email gets more eye contact from me than my husband does.

My coach Amy Ruppert gently suggested that I have a "soft addiction" to my email. I need to feel needed. I love the adrenaline rush of a new message. I want to feel important. And constantly engaging in online activities gives me a high. But like all highs, there's a crash that follows, and only the next "refresh" will give me that good feeling all over again.

I don't want to miss a thing online – a Facebook post, a Tweet, an email -- and this drive has cost me time and trust with the people who really need me offline: my family. My nine-year old daughter Sophie has called me on this more than once. "You love your iPhone more than you love me," she has said. While we both know that this couldn't possibly be true, we also both see where my "tech-havior" is, at times, self-indulgent, self-aggrandizing, and just plain selfish.

Leave it to Sophie to bottom-line the right prescription: "You need some Techno-Bismol!"

She was right – my gut was telling me that I needed to unplug more often, so that I could plug in to what and who really matters.

So here's what I did: I committed to stop using my computer or checking email on my iPhone from the time my kids get home from school until they go to bed at night.

Now before you get all, "but I can't do that because..." let me finish.

- It works for me because my friends and family can call me if they need me.
- It works for me because I'm not a doctor, I don't work on Wall Street, and I don't have clients who, if they can't reach me for several hours, are risking their life or livelihoods.
- It works for me because my husband and I are very mean and controlling (the 10-and-under-set's interpretation) and make our exhausted twins go to bed by 8:30 pm.
- Most importantly, it has worked for me because I told the kids that I was committing to do this, and I asked them to hold me to my word. Have you ever invited your kids to catch you doing the wrong thing? Their attention, motivation and commitment go through the roof.

I custom-designed this addiction-reduction plan for me and my family, and I still have work to do before I have this licked.

Bottom line: I'm not saying that you have a problem. I am just wondering aloud if other people in your life want more of your eye contact, ear contact, and human contact.

And if so, what's your dose of "Techo-Bismol" going to look like? You won't find it on Google. You'll find it in your gut.