

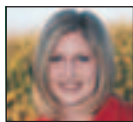
# Always in constant, instant contact

**A** FEW years back, I attended a conference with an old acquaintance. Toward the end of one day, she called her husband's cell phone. He didn't answer, so she called again. And again. And again.

A half hour and a dozen phone calls later, she had worked herself into a panic. Something could've happened to him. He wasn't answering his phone. Something must have happened to him.

By the time he did answer, she was in tears, and he was confused. I don't even remember why he didn't answer, but it was a pretty benign excuse, like he'd left the phone in the truck or something.

I watched the whole scene play out like a bad sitcom — the kind where one guy shakes the other guy by the shoulders and yells, "You've got to get



## My Generation By HOLLY SPANGLER

a grip, man!" Because really, so what if someone doesn't answer their cell phone? The chance that they're lying beneath some piece of heavy machinery, waiting for you to call, panic when they don't answer and then call 911 is really pretty slim.

When, exactly, did we become so connected that a disconnect can trigger our panic button? And why do we expect to be able to pick up the phone and talk to someone, no matter where they are?

### Just checking in

We see the same thing happening with parents and their teenagers. Four out of every five teenagers now have cell phones — a rate that's doubled since 2004. The average young person gets their first cell phone at 10 or 11 years old.

It's definitely useful for safety and rides and such, but a lot of those teenagers have to call home when they get where they're going. Then they have to call before they head home. Then their parents call and check on them a couple times during the outing.

Maybe I'll feel differently in 10 years when my kids are driving, but what ex-

actly is all that calling accomplishing? Is a call before they make the 15-minute drive home going to keep a deer from jumping out in front of them? It eases parental worry, but maybe we shouldn't worry so much in the first place.

It all just seems like a lot of awareness. Like we're a little too connected. In college, I used to go a couple weeks without hearing from my parents. Now, between cell phones, texting and Facebook, I'm not sure that would even be possible. And on Facebook — the great waster of time I don't have — folks can post a wide variety of status updates, as in "Holly is writing a column" or "Holly is doing the laundry."

There's the mundane: "Sarah is not looking forward to cleaning."

The mom is having a bad day: "Amy just took the kids for pictures, and Ben threw up all over the stroller."

The observational: "Steve says in the middle U.S., we say 'out east' or 'out west' to describe the coasts. How do the coasts describe us?"

The celebratory: "Jenny is WOOHOO! GO ILLINI!"

The overburdened: "John just failed his chem test."

The nonsensical song lyric: "Emily is writing love on her arms."

Given their sheer variety, status updates are a window into a person's day. Or their moment.

## More online

Check out the My Generation blog at [www.PrairieFarmer.com](http://www.PrairieFarmer.com).

Why do we expect to be in constant contact? Because we've gotten used to it. And because we can. At any given point in the day, I can call my husband's cell phone and be reasonably assured that, as long as he has reception and can hear it ring, we can talk. Of course, I don't do that very often, because I'd drive him crazy.

### Text me

Texting, as my college-age friend Jessica points out, is one way to not actually make a phone call "but still be in touch with the play by play." Of course, she stands in stark contrast to the average teenager, who sends thousands of text messages per month. Jessica is a very normal, very socialized person who doesn't even have a text plan on her phone. I asked her if that was un-American for someone in her age demographic. "It's that constant in-touch thing. It's not really necessary in my book," she replied. "I like people, but not that much. Sorry, world!"

■ Comments? E-mail [hspangler@farmprogress.com](mailto:hspangler@farmprogress.com).

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