STATIC

"Auto Format," by Navneet Alang
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Nervousness, Jane Frances Dunlop writes, "marks the work of entanglement"—it's the experience of static. Unlike social anxiety, which seals us inside ourselves, "nervousness is like a glitch … it makes it possible for us to perceive the systems that we work through," those which online networks reify. Getting together is a need—to withhold it from others is a form of deprivation or torture; to refuse it can be a form of self-harm, or evil—and there is no having gotten together, only a never-satisfied effort whose requirements change by the moment, detectable by its failures, identified as longing, longing alongside. Empathy is insufficient. But it makes life livable. There is no triumph over evil, but evil does not touch the good; the good, like the evil, is in others. —*Alexandra Molotkow*

AUTO
FORMAT

I carry my followers with me everywhere, and I don't mean on my phone by NAVNEET ALANG

Twitter, by its own hand or some sudden shift in trends, will one day die. What will I do then? The engine of my thought is always directed toward Twitter. As I walk the city, I am attuned to that little empty box insistently asking "What's happening?" My experience of the material world is shadowed by a kind of holographic plane, a translucent layer over everything, studded with tweet buttons. Conversations, happenings in public spaces, street art, or a celebrity

sighting—these are all fodder for a reality that I have come to perceive in tweet-size fragments.

Twitter has colonized my mind. Almost every day for just under a decade, I have checked the site, have tweeted, retweeted, been subtweeted. My mental map is the frontier surrendered, and Twitter is the empire. To become occupied by a social network is to internalize its gaze. It is to forever carry a doubled view of both your own mind and the platform's. What beckons initially

is what feels like a blank canvas—some empty space onto which one can splash one's desires. So, like millions of others, I conjured a persona for Twitter, at first modulating myself for the tech- and pop-culture-savvy early users, then later techno-skeptics and lefty cultural critics, and now for the many like me who are just exhausted by the whole thing and make aimless or bitter jokes.

That we perform for others isn't exactly new; it is, rather, a fundamental part of who we are. The field of psychology is littered with concepts like the looking-glass self—in which we form our self-conception based on others' perception of us—or David Elkind's imaginary audience, a term describing how an envisioned, general audience affects our behavior. Writing out our identities as an act of self-creation is perhaps the most obvious way in which we respond to this phantom viewing public, positioning and shaping our words to suit who we imagine to be reading them. In *Politics and Aesthetics in the Diary of Virginia Woolf,* author Joanne Tidwell suggests that Woolf—an author who otherwise demanded much of her audience—wrote for an older self, imagining an ideally sympathetic reader, as if in her diaries Woolf wrote to the person she hoped to become. Social media is another kind of public diarizing, and its trajectory aims at a similarly ideal avatar— it externalizes thought, but also the interpersonal, the communicative. We use it to seek out an empathic witness for our scribblings, projecting into the murk of online space an audience who sees us as we hope to be seen.

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TWITTER, WHICH IS PUBLIC in both its default settings and its culture, concentrates this effect. You are almost always followed by those you don't know, or the bots and spam accounts who don't quite exist but appear to. Each numerical addition to one's follower list amounts to a little increase in our sense that people have chosen to watch because there is something about us—a wry smirk in a profile pic, an offhandedly funny or heartfelt tweet—that drew them in. One's audience is like a darkened theater punctuated by hundreds of eyes, anticipating that self-image tucked into the corner of one's mind, carried about as one moves through the world. If in specifics we distinguish between bots, brands, and our friends, in practical terms they all form part of the same expectant crowd.

Thus, the imagined audience is often just

To become occupied by a social network is to internalize its gaze, to carry a doubled view of your own mind and the platform's

that: an imagining; a conveniently blank, conjured thing, a sort of perfect Other, all id and ego but no wagging finger of the superego—a blurry, smeared collection of people we want to like us, be attracted to us, be jealous of us. We aren't so much writing to people or acting ourselves out but invoking what we imagine our ideal audience to be. A Twitter joke isn't just an attempt to get laughs or acquire likes; it's an attempt to extract from the faceless dark of the limitless web an exact body of people who find what we find funny, funny.

But the imagined Other is not just some conveniently homogeneous mass. It is always split, fissures of the Real forming in our fantasizing. It is a horizon of general possibility punctuated by pillars of aspiration and threatening figures of repression, sharp pinpricks interrupt-

ing the easy reverie of perfect sympathy. Among the unindividuated mass are those we desperately want to please, those whose money we want, those we want to fuck, those who are out of our orbit and to whom we are grateful for just a shred of attention. There are, too, the predators, the haters, the naysayers, the racists and the sexists, the homophobes, the chaotic monsters who gather around the word "troll." We push down the thought of one so that we might bathe in the affirmation of the other.

The idealized audience is a thing you forever create and that creates you at the same time. To have an audience at all is to be relentlessly concerned with how you will be read. At times Twitter provides the perfectly sympathetic audience we don't have elsewhere: a warm embrace to soothe our vulnerabilities, fears, and desires, made more welcoming by the fact that our audience isn't quite a real person but rather something just close enough to the outline of a person to function like one in our psychology. But the very blankness of that Other imbues it with the threat of disapproval, wildly vacillating in our imaginations from a nagging "no" to the glare of white supremacy or patriarchy. Watch your tone, we tell ourselves, and even when we are actively defiant, that is exactly what we are doing. Each tweet has to be read with the same doubled view of its production: a string of words meant to mean something to someone, and an expression aimed at no one in particular; an object made to expel some desire, not meant to really communicate anything.

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Maybe colonization is the right term for Twitter. The internalization of another structure is, after all, just the model of colonialism deployed by the most successful and insidi-

ous powers. Thomas Babington Macaulay, the British bureaucrat deeply invested in instituting British schooling in 19th-century India, wrote in his now infamous "Minute on Education" that the point of any new education system in the country was to reform educated Indians into an Anglicized middle class bureaucracy who, indoctrinated in English supremacy, would remake India in Britain's image. The point wasn't to repress; it was to have the colonial subject come to express the values of the colonizer "through their own volition."

The tension between the imagined audi-

We aren't so much writing to people or acting ourselves out but invoking what we imagine our ideal audience to be

ence who sees you perfectly and the one who you contort yourself to please is precisely the nature of modern control. When in response to the ubiquity of surveillance we namedrop Foucault—speaking of the way sous-veillance has chilling effects—we often forget that the French philosopher suggested that power doesn't simply say "no" like a police officer brandishing a truncheon; it beckons us to say yes, asking us to remake ourselves in its image, happily and contentedly producing the right sort of content. To internalize the structure of a social network is a way of both connecting with other humans and becoming subservient to our imagined visions of what they want. To use Twitter is to become its consumer but also its bureaucrat. We tweet and read, expressing and absorbing what we wish as we propagate and internalize the logic of the platform, hundreds of millions of us performing these new behaviors in lockstep, beckoning each other to join in. It is a kind of auto-colonization:

adopting the notion that a public digital self is a way to temporarily exceed the body, and embracing the personal brand as a mode of existence. We perform, as we always have, but perhaps more consciously, more acutely and persistently attuned to being watched. As we offload more of our identity and day-to-day life to the platform, we bend to the imagined Other like plants craning to maximize their exposure to sunlight.

I worry that this is what Twitter has done to me—or perhaps, what I have let it do to me. I have watched my tweets change over the years: first, in response to more followers, then to the incessant awareness that I need to make a living, then to callout culture, the politics of representation, and sheer exhaustion. But a decade on, I still find myself thinking in the terms of Twitter: how each absurd, mundane happening in my life might be framed so as to be alluring to my audience, a potential employer, a date, or new friend. I still always carry my followers with me. In fact, I can't get rid of them. They are like a ghostly companion, ever at my side. It isn't just my tweets that have changed, but the way in which I relate to reality.

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It is not, as so many state too breezily, too unthinkingly, that I am simply lost in the frippery of the everyday; rather, each pla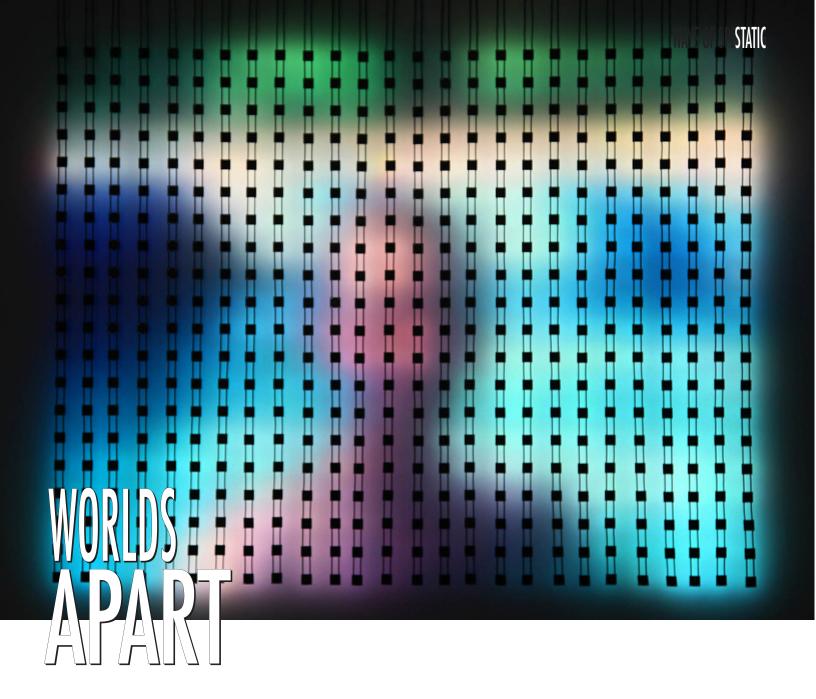tform offers broad structural and economic incentives for me to perform in a particular way. Twitter asks for the quip, the incisive takedown, or the viral. Instagram beckons the beautiful or the conspicuously consumed. Facebook demands the emotional or the inflammatory, the easily liked or the easily shared. Like a digitized medieval morality play, we have outsourced virtues and vices—Joy, Envy, Lust, Fear—to the dynamics of each platform. It is this, contrary to the ceaseless debates over narcissism or distraction, that forms the crux of our bargain with social media. Those other issues are just the side effects of the main medication. We are always being reconfigured from the outside in. Just as the book shaped thought in a particular way, so too do the many facets of digital, each in their own way.

When my perfect Other disappears, what then? The bind of colonization is that the vacuum left by the colonizer's absence is so often filled by something similar. There is no going back from that global shift. And when Twitter fades I will seek out another holographic companion that offers the same release, and relentless pressure. Some other structure will occupy me—and it too will implore me to consider what it means when it incessantly asks: What's happening? ◉

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WORLDS APART

Video-only "visitation" shrouds the reality of life in custody by SARAH BELLER

LAURA'S YOUNGER BROTHER whom I'll call John, age 26, had been addicted to heroin for a while. In December he was arrested for burglary. He had been arrested before, spending a night or two in jail, but this was the first time he couldn't get out. His bond was set at $10,000 cash only.

That's how Laura learned about "My Tech Friends," a company that sells technology to jails and prisons for use in commissaries, phone calls, and remote video visitation—the only way she can communicate with her brother while he waits in Clark County Jail, Indiana. While the jail doesn't technically disallow in-person visits to all inmates, John says he's never heard of anyone having one. Like most people in jail, he's only stuck there because his family can't afford the bail while he waits for his trial. In John's case, that could take quite a while. He does have a lawyer—a public defender, whom he hopes is good. But it's not like he's ever met him, or even talked to him on the phone. His lawyer has communicated with him by letter a few times in the nine months he's been in the jail so far.

Laura and John's parents, who live 40 min-

utes away, visit weekly. But they're only allowed to see him over video chat from a separate room at the facility. At Clark County, video visitation is free if you go to the jail; you can chat remotely, from home or wherever you have an internet connection, but you're charged $5 per 15 minutes. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, a research and advocacy organization challenging over-criminalization and mass incarceration, jails that provide free video visiting onsite often limit those visits to brief periods during the weekday, when people are at work and school, to encourage the costlier remote chats. Some other jails charge for use of the technology even if you do come to the facility. Video visits make the most sense in state and federal prisons, which can often be far away and difficult and/or expensive for families to get to—the technology could save families travel costs and prevent them from having to miss work and school. But it's been local jails that have most embraced the technology

Even in jails, video visiting *could* be a helpful supplement to traditional in-person visits. It could save children the traumatic experience of entering a jail and seeing a parent trapped inside; it could save visitors and prisons the emotional, temporal, and financial costs of intense processing and search procedures. It could increase flexibility in visiting hours and expand visiting opportunities, say from home-bound family members, clergy, and other members of a community. It could be used in reentry planning, to connect prisoners with reentry programs prior to release. In-person visits are highly mediated, too: Even before video visiting was implemented in the 1990s, most counties had eliminated "contact" visits where visitors and prisoners could touch. Following this logic, the industry claims that video visiting can provide easy, convenient communication with loved ones.

But while much of the technology's potential lies in its use as a *supplement* to in-person visits, jail facilities throughout the country are increasingly adopting the costly technology *in place of* in-person interactions. More than 13 percent of local jails in the United States now use video visitation, and most of them (74 percent), banned in-person visits after adding the new technology, according to research by the Prison Policy Initiative (PPI). Securus, one of the most powerful companies in the phone and video visit industry, has in the past required the termination of in-person visits in their contracts, although thanks to advocacy they have recently announced they will no longer do so. Just last month, Governor Jerry Brown of California vetoed a bill that would have forced jails who adopted the video-visit technology to keep in-person visitation available. At least 11 counties in California have so far eliminated, plan to eliminate, or severely restrict in-person visitation in favor of video visiting technology, which families and activists say is a poor substitute.

As the Department of Justice stated in a 2014 report, in-person visiting helps maintain family stability, reduces disciplinary infractions and violence, and reduces recidivism. We don't know if video visiting in its place would have the same effects, but it seems unlikely. Not least because video visitation technology frequently fails to work effectively—or, more accurately, it succeeds at working poorly.

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"People compare video visiting to Skype or FaceTime," says Bernadette Rabuy, Senior Policy Analyst of PPI, "because that's an easy way to explain what's going on. But it's not like those services." Skype and FaceTime are designed to allow us to feel together when we're apart: long-distance couples use them to keep in touch; some therapists and doctors now conduct clinical sessions over video. The video visiting technology used in the carceral setting can do the opposite: make people feel worlds apart, when they might really just be on opposite ends of a jail. The technology seems designed to prevent intimacy and create a sense of disconnection. If Skype can simulate the feeling of being in a room with someone, carceral video technology can simulate something like being in a room filled with a dense fog and loud static;

if you stretch out your hand in front of you, it's not clear what you'll touch, or whether you'll touch anything at all.

When Laura tried to video visit John from where she lives, in another state, "it wasn't worth it," she says. "My brother answered the call, and I could tell he just thought it was gonna be a waste of time because he'd seen other inmates doing it. I was trying to show him, with my computer screen, the outside of the house I was in, just so he could see some outdoors, because he hasn't been outside in a year. But every time you move your face away from the screen's camera it goes black. I thought that was a technical glitch, but based on an email I received, that's an intentional technology they have on it to try to prevent flashing of gang signs, or someone showing pornography."

In the ad copy on its website, Tech Friends reveals the cause: "What's the biggest fear with remote video visitation? Lewd or inappropriate content coming into your facility. While other vendors offer you the ability to monitor video using your personnel, the Eclipse technology eliminates it. See for yourself."

The link takes you to a YouTube video. A stock-photo pops up, one that can only have resulted from the search term "naughty cop": a woman lying on her back, legs in the air, with a black police hat hanging jauntily off one foot. A black screen swipes across her body, leaving only a small square of her head visible. Above her head, words appear: "It's all about CONTROL."

The image fades, and loud buzzing feedback plays. We then watch a role-play of a simulated video visit between an "inmate" and an older, father figure. The simulation has the feel of an '80s PSA, with the kind of acting that's so fake you wonder why they bothered to stage it. Both the "inmate" and the "visitor" appear uncomfortable; they speak over each other, and generally seem to have trouble connecting, technologically and emotionally. "[It] looks like a dungeon here,"

the inmate says. "Cold."

"Right," says the visitor. "Well, this video calling stuff's pretty cool."

"Yeah, I guess so, if you want to see people on the outside. Makes you homesick—"

"You've got a lot of people who want to see you in jail," the visitor interrupts. "We could probably sell this video."

The audio is horrible, the buzzing incessant. When the visitor moves out of the frame, the visuals on his screen go black.

The skit seems like an ineffective advertisement, until you remember that Tech Friends isn't

Certain flaws in carceral video technology, like blackouts when a visitor's head leaves the screen, are "security features"

marketed to people in prison, or their families on the outside. It's marketed to corrections departments. According to Prison Policy Initiative, which has been working to get the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to address this issue since 2014, many of the problems with video visiting "are the inevitable result of the failed market structure: the companies consider the facilities—not the families paying the bills— as their customers." Tech Friends is betting that a sheriff's main goal isn't enabling good communication between prisoners and their families.

Certain flaws in the technology, like blackouts when a visitor's head leaves the screen, are "security features" rather than bugs. And others, like time delays, glitchiness, cutting in and out, sudden hangups, and lack of user support, may be key sources of revenue. As in the telephone industry, which PPI and families have been calling on the FCC to intervene in for over a de-

cade, companies "find it economically advantageous to use poorly calibrated security systems to drop phone calls and trigger additional connection charges," PPI reports. And it's profitable for the prison and jails too, who sometimes get a portion of revenue kicked back to them, in the form of "commissions" from each visit. Before advocates stepped in, some children had to pay up to $1 per minute to talk to an incarcerated parent. Now the fees are lower, but there is also a long list of fees for other "services," like setting up an account, closing an account, and even processing a payment.

"This is a vulnerable population that they are working with—the companies can get away with a bad product," says Bernadette Rabuy. "If you had a problem [in the outside world] you might call the company, or online chat with them. With these families, if the family members are having an issue they might not even be able to have a phone number to call."

A then-representative from a Missouri county purchasing department told a reporter, "I guess it depends what viewpoint you're coming from. The way I look at it, we've got a captive audience. If they don't like (the rates), I guess they should not have got in trouble to begin with."

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Video visiting makes it more difficult for families to know how someone's really doing. At one point in the Tech Friends demonstration video, the "inmate" asks if the "visitor" would send money for commissary. "I don't think so," the visitor says. "We've been through this before … it'll just get spent on someone else."

"Oh, you think I'm getting pushed around in here?"

"I know you're getting pushed around there."

The inmate brings his head close to the screen, which moves in a lunging, time-delayed manner. "Look," he says, "no bruises." His face is blurry.

During video visits, families struggle to clearly see the incarcerated person, and instead face a pixelated or sometimes frozen image. Video chat confuses your senses: It's a jerky, indistinct, distorted version of an interaction. "You can't really assess their health, their skin tone," Laura says. "You can't really assess whether or not the jail is doing something really wrong." For her, "It's very dehumanizing to be told you can't be in the same room, even for a short time, as the person you love." The effects are worst, Laura says, for people who have young children. "[Kids] don't know what's happening. They can't communicate over the computer. It keeps children away from their parents."

Another big problem with video chats, especially bad ones: "You can't make eye contact." In her book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other,* MIT professor Sherry Turkle writes that robots who can make eye contact are key to human acceptance of artificial intelligence—without eye contact, machines can fall into the "uncanny valley," and a person can seem not quite human. With video visitation, there's a sense that you can't experience the full reality of the person on the other end of the camera; nor can they experience yours. On top of that is the paranoia of knowing you're under surveillance, or, even worse, that you *may* be. At the bottom of the screen runs the text: "This call may be monitored or recorded." In-person visitation is heavily monitored, too, but in person you can whisper, murmur, mutter, imply, suggest and shrug, gestures and intonations that are lost with the video technology used in jails, which can reduce interaction to its crudest features. The lack of intimacy, and ability to communicate subtly in video visits can completely change the dynamic between loved ones.

"You can't speak freely," Laura says. "That would be another part of seeing him in person—being able to speak more candidly. Not to say anything bad, but just to ask, like … how are you really feeling?" On John's end of the video visit, "he's in a room with dozens of men. It's incredibly loud, and he doesn't want to talk in-depth

about his feelings in front of all these men he has to maintain a pecking order with every day." The necessity of having to articulate something loudly and clearly over video might make it not worth the risk.

When you're already in an emotionally fragile place, the unpredictability of these video interactions can be further frustrating and traumatizing. When you're using Tech Friends, Laura says, "you're really scared they're gonna cut it off at any minute for something you did." Even if "they" don't cut the feed, internet connections or the technology itself can cause the video to disconnect.

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THERE'S NO SHORTAGE OF much more advanced video technology in jails, though it's not being installed to help families. *60 Days In,* a reality television show that just concluded its second season on A&E, is set in the very jail where John is locked up, and was filmed during his incarceration. According to Clark County Sheriff Jamey Noel, the show was conceived as a means of exposing criminal behavior within the facility, which was "known for being a violent, sort of terrible place," in the words of ABC News' Dan Abrams. Rather than install undercover cops, Noel decided, in collaboration with a production company, to enlist civilians willing

While Clark County jail limits families' access to prisoners, it welcomes TV producers

to spend 60 days in the jail as plants.

"They came in and installed some pretty high-tech cameras that we've never had in our facility before," Noel told *Entertainment Weekly*—reportedly more than 300 round-the-clock surveillance cameras, worth over $200,000, which A&E allowed them to keep. First Timers Holdings LLC, the production company, also paid the jail $500 a day to film, which Noel says added up to $51,000 over the two seasons, on top of paying for undercover inmates' meals and reimbursing officers' salaries over the course of filming. Noel, who told reporters that the jail has increased services for inmates since the series began, said that the show resulted in seven officers resigning and five getting fired for unacceptable behavior. He also said the surveillance equipment helped the administration charge inmates with an estimated 35 criminal charges.

Prison authorities were legally obligated to tell the prisoners that they would be filming a TV show, and give them the option of whether or not to appear on camera. They told them the show was a documentary about "first-time inmates." What they didn't tell the prisoners, or the guards, was that the seven "first-time prisoners" featured were not real prisoners—rather, they were reality show contestants acting as undercover spies. The show's producer says they employed a team of lawyers to make sure they were getting away with as much as they could without technically violating any of the prisoners' rights. "We're not coming out and deceiving anyone," executive producer Greg Henry told BuzzFeed. "We're just telling them the doc is about first-timers and that's the place we landed where everyone felt comfortable."

"All the inmates were excited to watch it on the jail's TVs when it premiered," Laura says. "But they weren't allowed to." People who were incarcerated at the time of filming, but have since been released, have said the show was edited for drama. "They did alter a few things to give it a whole different meaning," DiAundré Newby told *News and Tribune,* "so I'm quite sure that a lot of that had to do with them trying to get ratings and kind of Hollywood it up a little bit."

A&E declined to comment to the publication. A video's distorted version of reality is quite familiar to most of the men and women locked up in Clark County jail, only allowed to see glimpses of the outside in stuttering video snippets, edited and "eclipsed" by Tech Friends. While the jail limits families' access to prisoners, it welcomes TV producers.

In some ways, the success of *60 Days In* can trace its origin to the 1970s, when a boom in prison construction was accompanied by a series of laws designed to fill the structures—mandatory minimum sentences, "three strikes" laws, and the "war on drugs." At the same time, most states also enacted laws making it illegal for convicted authors to receive money for their writing; prison writing programs were defunded, and press access was restricted. The exploding prison population combined with the blackout of information created fodder for collective fantasizing about life in prison.

Neither video visitation nor *60 Days In* bring outsiders any closer to understanding life inside of Clark County Jail. Video visitation software blurs and blacks out the camera and *60 Days In* uses dramatic music, quick cuts, and familiar reality-TV tropes like the "confessional" that obscure the chronology of events. These distortions can be painful for both prisoners and their loved ones and shroud the reality of life inside.

"Even superficially realistic representations, such as the *Oz* TV serial, end up masking or normalizing America's vast complex of institutionalized torture," writes historian Bruce Franklin. "Perhaps the dominant image, promulgated by the very forces that have instituted the prison-building frenzy, envisions prison as a kind of summer camp for vicious criminals, where convicts comfortably loll around watching TV and lifting weights."

In the penultimate episode of season two, the sheriff, his captain and a criminology professor debrief with one of the undercover contestants, Ashleigh. They ask her if, as a new mom, she was able to maintain relationships with her family while in jail using the technology available. "I know that the policy is no face-to-face visitation here," she says, "but I feel like that

would ease so much stress and tension. I feel like the benefit of someone being able to see their family and know that someone actually is out there and cares, that would really help reduce someone being locked up again."

At first Laura couldn't bring herself to watch *60 Days In,* because she knew it was filmed while her brother was going through withdrawal from heroin, without access to replacement medication like Suboxone, which the jail didn't allow. It also showed the prisoners corralled in a holding room for days, sleeping on the floor, without adequate water and shower facilities after a sewer pipe burst in the jail.

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IN TERMS OF REGULATING the video visiting industry on a federal level, Rabuy of PPI is worried that the FCC will not be able to do anything anytime soon. The FCC is still dealing with legal battles resulting from its attempts to regulate the phone industry, which similarly charges families exorbitant rates to stay in touch with incarcerated family members. Since premiering last March, *60 Days In* has become, according to BuzzFeed, "TV's No. 1 new unscripted cable series and the network's No. 1 program."

The roleplay ad for Tech Friends ends with the "inmate" trying to say something: "Hey, if you see—"

The "father" character speaks over him. "Okay I'm gonna hang up," he says calmly, with a slight smile. "Enjoy your stay at the 'hotel.'"

"Yeah, yeah, the roach motel," the inmate responds. "Thanks."

As he begins to stand up, both screens freeze. The two men's faces float; it's impossible to tell what they're looking at. All you can hear is loud buzzing. ◉

Sarah Beller is a social worker and writer.

NERVOUS?
WE SHOULD BE

Glitchiness proves how hard
it is to communicate in real time,
but also how hard we try by JANE FRANCES DUNLOP

ERTRUDE STEIN, IN an essay on the theater from the 1930s, wrote that "nervousness consists in needing to go faster or go slower so as to get together. It is that that makes any-body nervous." Nervousness, that is, is not an individualized experience but a social relation. To be nervous is to be trying — and failing — to get to a point of emotional cohesion, or at least understanding, with another in the midst of a performance.

I think we live in nervousness these days.

What Stein writes about the spectator-per-former relationship resonates with the contem-porary experience of social media. In the theater, we watch action unfold in real time without necessarily being in time with it. The players on stage and the audience each have a rhythm of emotional responsiveness that is not in sync as the action unfolds. Social media make out of our everyday performances the same nervousness that Stein found in the theater.

Performance relies on a sense of presence. It

occurs in a shared location and creates a proximity that is disguised as togetherness. But the performers and the audience are still separated into their delineated spaces. They are close but not together. For Stein, this means that the actors' and the audience's emotions are "syncopated": The actions conveyed by the actors and observed by the audience provoke an out-of-time empathy.

Stein's nervousness is, I want to argue, the sensation of empathy alongside its impossibility, its incompleteness. Fellow feeling, feeling alongside, is an exercise in imagining our experiences as correlative, but togetherness alone does not guarantee such correlativity. Together is not at once, but rather in proximity. This, here, is the point and value of nervousness: It marks how empathy, how feeling together, inevitably includes a distance — in time, if not in space — that we wish we could overcome.

To be nervous is to be aware of time as multiple, as disjunctive. Nervousness is always an aspect of mediation, and so has been on the rise since modernity. With social media, we are accumulating encounters that suppose a shared space and yet are inevitably executed from different places. We enact our relationships as a series of encounters in which we become aware of occupying different emotional times.

Each of our engagements with social media stages a small theater, and a proximity disguised as togetherness. Platform as stage — a device touched becomes proscenium, and we are made performer and audience. As both simultaneously, we are increasingly attuned to our syncopated interactions with one another. The particularities of our positions, all the ways that we are experiencing the world differently, are confirmed by the differences in our emotional time. Presents proliferate. We can't avoid recognizing that we are all out of sync — in different emotional times in the same conceptual space.

This means much of our emotional labor is spent caring for relationships in a together that is also very much an apart. Though social media platforms tend to posit a kind of isolation, an ability to operate autonomously in a time of one's one, they intensify our emotional invest-

ment in one another. Nervousness stems from this experience of living, feeling, and building emotional lives in digital ubiquity.

If social media promise a kind of unilateral access to sociality, nervousness belies that promise. Social media propose an ideal of sociality as something to be achieved, an end goal that can be completed. Nervousness reminds us that the work of being social is never complete. But at the same time, that nervousness is also the means by which we actually begin to do the work of being together across and through these media. It marks the work of entanglement.

To be tangled is to be close enough to become enmeshed with one another while still being different, discrete things. Nervousness is the affect of that weaving. It is the possibility of being together and not just in mere proximity of each other that makes us feel nervous. In being made nervous, we learn how to live in the feeling of being in different emotional times, to be together while apart.

Nervousness articulates the emotional labor of keeping time with a system that is out of time with you. It makes us realize that we are doing this work, and it is important, because this work is worth doing. Naming our emotional labor is essential, so that we do not erase the effort we make to care.

Nervousness is like a glitch. Like other kinds of glitching and friction, it makes it possible for us to perceive the systems that we work through. It makes the work of sustaining a syncopated relation with another legible as a kind of dissonance. In the context of relationships mediated online, what Stein calls "nervousness" is emotional noise, the affective friction in our interactions. This failure to communicate with perfect transparency — this noise in the signal — also confirms that there is in fact something being communicated.

In *The Interface Effect,* Alexander Galloway describes how interfaces tend toward becoming so intuitive that they become indiscernible and thus inoperable. When we no longer notice them, we can't consciously determine how to use them. He quotes this passage from Michel Serres:

Systems work because they don't work. Non-functionality remains essential for functionality. This can be formalized: pretend there are two stations exchanging messages through a channel. If the exchange succeeds — if it is perfect, optimal, immediate — then the relation erases itself. But if the relation remains there, if it exists, it's because the exchange has failed. It is nothing but mediation. The relation is a non-relation.

Noise, glitching, nervousness are instances of system imperfection, essential non-functionality. They let us situate ourselves in relation to one another and the systems that mediate us. To the extent that social media interfaces generate glitches, they deepen rather than extinguish nervousness and thus deepen emotional connection.

Nervousness, like noise, indicates that we are not trapped as isolated nodes in a networked totality. Instead, it confirms the space between us. The failure to reach empathetic togetherness that it signals nevertheless confirms there is someone else (or many others) present and makes unmistakable their different standpoints.

Having to think of our relationships in terms of the discomfort of not getting it right, of having to pay further attention, our mediated interactions gain rather than lose value. We usually think of people who are in the room with us as being present and capable of being connected with, but this is merely a bias. The people in the room with us can be inaccessible or as out of sync with us as those online. We may be totally indifferent to them in a way we can't in the social media space, where their presence becomes a notification, a demand for reciprocity.

We talk about how we are unwittingly used in experiments by social media platforms, how we know we are always being watched. And we also know that in our efforts to feel together, contemporary life requires we participate in platforms that make emotional demands of us, regardless of our ambivalence about the data we generate. Alongside our suspicions of how social media frame our exchanges, it is important to pay attention to how and why they stick or catch. The nervousness about digital communication technologies may simply be part of how being alive always already makes us nervous.

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Thinking about the emotional labor of connectivity can too easily fall into end-of-world anxiety about our perpetual performances on social media.

I want to interrupt that anxiety with nervousness.

Though both affects begin in a sense of apprehension, in awareness of the emotional labor required to reach the future, nervousness is different from anxiety. Anxiety is a clinical condition. It suspends possibility: Anxiety attacks, and it becomes impossible to be anything except oneself. Anxiety, in the collapse of a panic attack, moves inward. It forces a self-absorption for survival.

Nervousness, as an attempt to go faster or slower so as to get together, holds onto the presence of others as that which is overwhelming, unsettling. This disturbs the smooth sociality promised by social media companies and preserves the inescapable friction of difference that is sociality.

I would rather be nervous than anxious. Anxiety is panic. When we insist that, because of technology, we are living in anxious times, we bring ourselves into our own catastrophe and paralysis. I do not want to name my social media condition — the contemporary condition — as something pervasively and unavoidably damaging to me. I do not want to participate in world building that totalizes technology's harm. The times cannot be unlivable, because they are where we live.

When we regard nervousness as emotional glitching, it confirms that a clear signal is never a possibility: We cannot understand each other perfectly. We cannot feel together. We are living in muddles and tangles of our emotions as we strive to feel together. We live in the mess of misunderstanding. The unease that comes from being out of time with one another is necessary and not going away. And this is a good thing.

Nervousness is ultimately produced through the facts of our incommunicable differences that exist online and off. Utopian visions of social co-

hesion too often forget these real ways in which our experiences of the same world are different. As writer and futurist Madeline Ashby reminds us, one person's utopia is another's dystopia.

But to palpably experience nervousness, as social media force us to do, is to be able to track these differences and trace their patterns. It is crucial to be nervous — it confirms that we are not solipsistic, not ignorant of disparate experiences of the world and past and present inequities. The nervousness that technology now foregrounds stems not merely from mediation but from an old nervousness that is tied to those social inequities and the sense that popular imaginaries of feeling exclude or only conditionally acknowledge the experiences of so many people. The ability to feel one's nervousness come and go is a sign of privilege. Most people are already nervous, already operating outside the frictionless experience that signals privilege.

The purveyors of today's networked culture often try to efface nervousness with convenience and solipsism, preventing the understanding that eases exclusion. Social media platforms promise that difference can be erased, can be made irrelevant to an isolated user who does whatever whenever. But belief in that false promise simply reinforces selfishness and disconnection, and ultimately incites the anxiety and sense of doom of the despairing tech critic.

Culture and emotion are, as theorist Sara Ahmed writes, "sticky" with the accumulation of histories and practices. Sticky is what happens when our relations turn into affects that cling to objects, to people. This is how culture constructs emotions, how values and practices are built from our relations. To illustrate stickiness, Ahmed gives the example of the feminist killjoy who loudly disagrees with the conditions of inequity she sees. Her disagreement, her relation to the conditions she challenges, turn into a quality that sticks: She is disagreeable, disruptive. The reality of the conditions is dismissed, is made to stick to someone else.

This is how we build systems of inequity and re-enact them for each other: Nervousness shows us they are here. We do not like to be made nervous because nervousness is a desire to get to

a different speed, to correct the discrepancies we feel between our experiences of the world. It reminds us that we are functioning in difference. It maintains relation despite discomfort and forces an acknowledgement that we are out of sync, operating in inequity. Nervousness tells us that there is always difference and always work necessary to address that difference, but it never erases it.

Writing about the difficulty of diversity work, Ahmed argues that what is hard to some does not exist for others. She forces us to ask why anyone would think they could escape the hard, the difficult. In nervousness, what is hard becomes also something that can be worked with and through. It is hard to know what to do in the world, hard to be aware of the impacts and implications of the systemic inequities manifest in all our relations. Ashby refers to this when she talks about the distribution of utopias and dystopias. Nervousness is not only recognizing emotional times out of sync but also that one person's emotional time may be easier, is better, than another's.
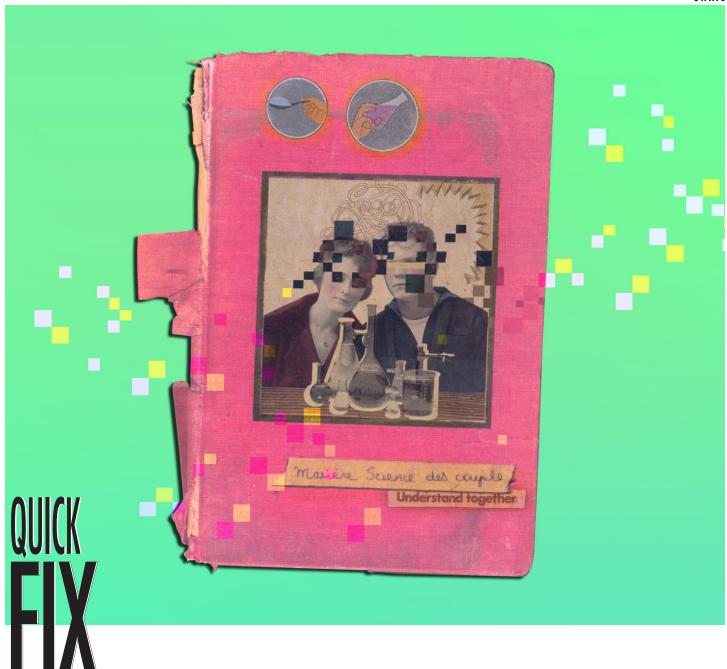
This is why we should be nervous: nervous about the difference we are living in and apprehensive about the futures that it anticipates. Nervousness reminds us of the affective costs and conditions of our relations as well as inequities in who performs emotional labor and who experiences affective distress. It makes us aware of the work required by relationships and the work we must undertake to acknowledge and accommodate differences (of location, of time, of gender, sexuality, race, ability, poverty, literacy) that inhere in all our relations, all our performances of self and of belonging.

Ideally, this awareness stops short of overwhelming us. We can then nervously prepare for different futures, contradictory and inconsistent ones. We can nervously try to bring ourselves together without ever assuming we've got there. ◦

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Matière Science des couple,
Understand together.

QUICK FIX

WikiHow is an ever-evolving collection of coping mechanisms
by NAOMI SKWARNA

TWO DOCUMENTS ARE open on your laptop: one, an article with a passage worth saving, the other, a Microsoft Word document where you've been assembling passages worth saving. You highlight the text in question, copy and paste it into the other document. A small clipboard materializes, offering a trio of "paste options," the second of which invites you to "match destination formatting." Upon clicking, the imported text trembles microscopically before presenting in the style of the native document. It's a small, good feeling.

I was an unpopular child. More than unpopular, I was loathed. Emotional, feckless, obsessed with birds. I did everything I could to make friends, and of course that only caused me to be further reviled. Something changed when I turned 16, and it had to do with my first taxable job at a popular clothing store. In this new destination, there was a woman named

Lindy who seemed well liked and normal, and I did whatever I could to copy her. Not copy—match. It was an adjustment of my entire format, rather than a replication of her style. I told jokes in her casual tone, suppressing my own laughter as she did. Her compliments were finely observed: I learned to watch and listen more closely so I could also offer true praise. If she wore a burgundy hoodie, I wore a cobalt hoodie. Versions, alpha and beta. It helped that she was kind and (perhaps unconsciously) encouraged me to follow her example, gifting hand-me-downs; sharing her Fig Newtons. I began eating Fig Newtons.

Everywhere I went after that, I matched destination formatting to the best of my ability, and it worked. Immediately, people seemed more willing to talk to me. I examined everyone who seemed to be nicely ordered, at school and beyond, cobbling together an identity based on the data. I didn't think about what it meant that my presentation was founded on an unstable calculation.

Destinations are subtler now, eluding the often observable categories that children and teenagers carry with them. Matching a pre-existing format has become intimately complex. I do it by accident, meaning that I have to be careful not to start speaking in someone else's accent after talking to them for five minutes. Matching is a way of inducing sympathy between myself and another; of contriving a connection when aloneness is the default. It also means that being alone, freshly alone, takes me back to zero. The dissolution of a relationship, for example, feels like a deletion.

In late July, I stopped seeing someone whom I loved, but couldn't be with. Just before that, I stopped attending therapy, which over the years had brought my awareness to this matching tactic of mine. Why did I stop going?

Hubris and economy combined. Why did I stop seeing someone I love? A variation of the same. We all cope in different ways at different times with common events. Fights, break-ups, crushing solitude. But after living through so many versions of the same thing, I wanted to manage this separation differently, without turning to an

If you needed an explicit reason to believe that humanity is embarrassing, wikiHow formalizes it in a judgment-free zone

outside human source for instruction.

Anything, especially what ails you, can be framed as a do-it-yourself project. DIY gives a sense of agency over one's needs; hand-stitching your split jeans its own grim reward. Adjacent to the DIY outlook is autodidacticism, learning that lends itself to notions of the self-made genius as well as the deluded fool. On the far side of DIY is self-help, the most remedial and voracious of the three. Where DIY suggests a barrel-chested confidence in one's own ability to complete a task usually left for a paid expert, self-help instills in us not just the desire to fix all that's wrong, but also a fear of what will happen if we don't. I couldn't afford therapy anymore, but I didn't want to rot out from the inside like an old honeycrisp. I thought about what I did have: a terrible mood, wifi, and an uncontested impulse to do it myself.

I Googled in succession, *How to stop thinking about someone,* and *How to stop missing someone,* and *How to be so lonely you could eat your own arm.* No matter what combination of glum post-break-up sentiments I typed in, the top hit was almost always wikihow.com.

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WIKIHOW DOT COM LAUNCHED on January 15, 2005 in homage to Wikipedia: a potentially infinite platform tracked and edited by an impassioned, volunteer community. The site was created by web entrepreneur Jack Herrick, who had previously bought and sold eHow.com, and is, according to his own Wikipedia profile, a wiki enthusiast. The word *wiki* (which means "quick" in Hawaiian) refers to a collaborative mode of website production and maintenance that uses relatively simple markup language. Anyone with a desire to contribute, amend, or correct can do just that. Every adjustment is explicitly traceable, making each wiki a kind of slow-moving asteroid of information, always on its way from somewhere, trailing stardust. A wiki only stops changing when it is deleted.

WikiHow took the philosophy of many minds augmenting distinct but related knowledge sets, applying it to the active parts of human, animal, and mineral behavior. "I think that building a universal how-to manual would be a tremendous gift for the world," Herrick said in a 2009 interview with Wikinews ("the free news source you can write!"). "Knowledge is power and wikiHow has the potential to make all of us a bit more powerful." Accounting for the site's popularity, he explains, "we had some articles of mixed quality, and editors joined to improve those articles, which in turn attracted more readers. We continue to depend on this same virtuous cycle."

What Herrick means is that wikiHow's badness is part of its appeal; part of what makes it a place where people, "mixed quality" as we are, want to be. A virtuous cycle—isn't that what

I'd also enjoyed, with Lindy and the countless others who helped me form an identity? I had imagined a process of folding myself into the prevailing document. WikiHow offered an alternative paradigm, along with the realization that there is no prevailing document: only a platform and the common language we use to mark it up.

Arriving at wikiHow's homepage, you are greeted with a banner assertion: "We're trying to help everyone on the planet learn how to do anything. Join us." Like Wikipedia, wikiHow is a place where you're never alone—each page

Step one advises "Being Oneself" and step three proposes "Talking Like a Normal Person," both of which sunk me into a morass of tautological thinking

includes its editing history, with a record of who did what. WikiHow adopts that as a gestalt, spotlighting editors' names and avatars; giving them front-end identities. This offers the illusion of being around others from the comfort of your bedroom, missing someone in spite of your desire not to. Besides the articles, I liked reading the messages that users leave for one another, the jovial pedantry automatically logged to individual Talk Pages. *Join us.*

If Wikipedia is about infinite knowing and wikiHow is about infinite doing, it's hard to discern which order is tallest. The guides can be as practical and specific as how to do a tuck jump or how to clean the mold out of your water bottle lid, low-stake DIYs in the scheme of things. But, sitting on my bedroom floor with two glasses of wine, the most fascinating articles are the ones offering instruction on how to relate to other people. Somewhere in my deep-dive, I

came across a guide to Being a Normal and Well Liked Girl, a premise so controversial I couldn't bear to leave it unread. Step one advises "Being Oneself" and step three proposes "Talking Like a Normal Person," both of which sunk me into a morass of tautological thinking. Being myself was not an option, and I didn't know what a normal person talked like. In my years of getting close enough to match formatting, I'd learned that no one is as Normal or Well Liked as they seem—Lindy was a recovering addict who stole clothes from the store that employed us, as a way of blowing off steam.

How to be a Normal and Well Liked Girl is tagged as a stub, which means "It's off to a good start, but still has room to grow into a more helpful resource. Until the article reaches its full potential, it will be hidden from search results. Can you help it flourish?" This is why it doesn't come up when you Google *how to be a normal well liked girl.* You can only access the page from inside the site.

Absorbing information and marking facts is what every human being does in some form or another, but tracking the incremental changes is not easy. Where relational matching uses assimilation, the wiki model both records and points to its own flaws, a public bid for help, lest it remain a stub. "Match destination formatting" assumes the destination format is secure. WikiHow imagines no such thing, and works accordingly. What a relief that so many of us want to know how to be normal—even if the answer itself is dubious as fuck.

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In certain moments, I really thought I was making progress

When I lose someone, my first impulse is to go through the receipts—reading every email, every text on record, trying to remember the first moment that signified some piece of it coming apart. Emails can be read over and over again for answers that never reveal themselves, nor relieve the present discomfort. So I read something else. Young Adult novels, cereal boxes, anything that will keep my reading eyes engaged. WikiHow, with its artless multi-step process to dealing with both existential woe and horse maintenance, was absurd enough to be exactly what I needed, even when the wisdom it provided was either common sense or notably odd. For instance, a note deep in the edit history of How to Fix the Crotch Hole in Your Jeans suggests sewing with floss instead of thread, "cuz floss is stronger." That might be true, but is it right?

Many of us have holes in our jeans, and we have even more opinions on exactly how to fix them. If you needed a really explicit reason to believe that humanity is embarrassing, wikiHow formalizes it in a judgment-free zone, enabling us to both ask and answer in relative anonymity. Additionally, it understands that for every person who needs to know *how,* there is at least one who needs to tell you. Coping mechanisms are reciprocal. They find partners among themselves, new ones emerging to feed off of/fulfill gaps created by those previous. WikiHow is a perfect ecology of diametric coping, and it has the receipts to prove it.

For most of August, I kept myself from doing things I would regret by reading hundreds of wikiHows, and using an odd dozen or so. The constant movement within WikiHow's pages became a source of distraction and comfort, as did the tweets, complete with famously uncanny artwork—tableaux of people thinking about objects and symbols with an expression of puckish intent. During a hike with my brother, I found a feather on the ground, which I learned came from the tail of a Northern Yellow-Shafted Flicker. I washed my hands, thinking about whatever avian disease lay within its glistening yellow barbules. Then I opened one of the many wikiHow tabs

at the top of my browser and typed in *How do I clean a feather.*

After neutralizing the feather and several household plastics, I learned how to stop thinking about someone through an extremely useful three-pronged methodology that could basically become your entire life's work, if you wanted. Part one, "Engage in thought stopping," includes the suggestion to scream STOP at yourself after three minutes of unwanted thought immersion. I love screaming, so this was fine. But the various steps involved in part two (keeping busy) and part three (using your brain) reminded me of my abysmal focusing skills. WikiHow's tips, including turning off the internet for 30 minutes and setting a timer for everything I decided to do, worked better than Ritalin. Now that I had focus, I needed more time in which to do it. I learned how to wake up earlier, which again promoted a technique of incremental awareness of time. After a week I was getting up at 6 a.m., and by 10, having the kind of despair that I typically apprehend with lunch. I wondered if I could cry less, and it turned out that yes, I can.

Links are opened in new tabs until each tab is the width of a pinkie nail. They're nice to refer to when I need something to refer to, but they're even nicer to close. Despite oft-psychotically phrased insights—*Having toned shoulders can be very attractive and really well toned shoulders can even be seen through clothing. Impress your crush with some rocking shoulders*—the guides were helpful in the way that advice from a friend somehow isn't. WikiHow writers can't see you at your worst, and their tools are as impersonal as hammers. They seem like promises rather than platitudes, the extension of each URL scanning as an imperative: "clean-a-feather," "elevate-your-self-esteem," "fix-the-crotch-hole-in-your-jeans." Still, thanks to the view count at the top of each page, I know that nearly a million people have wanted to stop thinking about someone, enough that they would punch it into a search bar.

For every article I used, I briefly felt like I was fixing something. In certain moments, I really thought I was making progress, nodding along to the patrol stream that users like Galactic Radiance and Hope0279 populated. But it was seeing that they'd been there less than a minute ago that made me feel better. I didn't even care to see what they'd done.

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Does wikihow just give the illusion of doing something, a series of processes to no end? That isn't a bad thing if it exercises our ability to care about the state of our tangible/intangible lives. The problem is that I got tired of caring as an exercise and wanted again to look in someone's face. I called my therapist and asked if I could come back, which she generously agreed to. As much as I would like to be a self-sufficient, autonomous user, solitude is less hard when I pay someone to soften it every two weeks.

I don't feel as achingly bad as I did a month ago, but it's the passage of time that put what hurt at a distance. Like "match destination formatting," wikiHow's content is incidental. As coping mechanisms, both drew me close enough to other people to see that they were struggling too. In the end, wikiHow's virtuous, virtual cycle wasn't enough. I needed a real person who I could talk to without timestamps. There are no perfect solutions; just sweaty stardust from the labor of our efforts.

Match Destination Formatting. Join Us. Both of these commands require the individual to step into a community and in doing so, admit that alone is a sensation more than a reality. I turn on airplane mode and read until my phone emits an arpeggio of gentle harp notes, which even though untrue, I feel I did myself. ◉

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