

Managing Self – How to Put Down Your Phone and Talk to a Stranger



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Coming out of college Eugene Cyril Smith III, better known as Geno Smith, had the world at his feet. He just finished his college career as the starting quarterback for the West Virginia Mountaineers, setting school records for passing attempts/passing yards and touchdowns. He was a "can't miss" National Football League (NFL) prospect, sure to be selected as one of the top picks in the spring NFL draft. He was on the road to real riches and fame, all of which would be realized before his 23rd birthday.

Despite his great success on the field, Geno had trouble interacting with NFL scouts and executives off the field. Various reports suggested that during informal interviews and discussions he struggled to put down his phone and interact with others; he gave the appearance that he would rather spend time texting friends and reading Twitter, than getting to know his potential employer.

In 2013, he was selected as a second-round pick (39th overall) and subsequently signed a four-year/five million dollar NFL contract. There was one other quarterback in the draft that year signed ahead of him, E. J. Manuel from Florida State. He also signed a four-year deal, only his was worth over nine million dollars. Though Geno himself, and others, truly believed he was a for sure “first round pick”, his love for his smartphone, over interacting with strangers/future employers, may have cost him five million dollars.

How do you handle new, face-to-face intergenerational, social or business interactions? Is it your natural reaction to become a part of a conversation or do you find that your common default is to turn to the screen in your phone for interaction? Think about how often you interact with your phone in a day; do you think you or any of your friends have ever suffered from “Nomophobia”, an anxiety disorder that surfaces when you cannot access your phone?

To lessen the likelihood of Nomophobia and to help you have a winning face-to-face intergenerational social or business interactions, consider these four simple tips:

- **Commit yourself to being present over being perfect.** Trust that you will be entering a safe environment that is free of shaming or judgment. Remember that not every hello is a job interview, nor does every interaction require a perfect answer. Embrace authentic curiosity, nurture it. You probably have more in common with the person across from you than you had first imagined. A simple conversation might shine a light on some thoughts and ideas that could help spur greater personal or professional growth. Commit to bringing your full self to your social engagements and professional settings. People who are standing next to you want to engage you, not you through your phone. Remind yourself that good will come from simply listening, observing, and interacting with others.
- **Practice turning your phone off and putting it away in a safe, not-that-easy- to-access place.** Practice letting go. Resist the urge to pull it out during a conversation and goggle others comments and questions. Free yourself from the urge to verify or validate, in real time, what others might say. There are many skills that you bring to an interaction that will be

endearing to others, however taking on the role of a self-appointed “fact checker” isn’t one. Breath, you will survive without technology, the event/human interaction won't last forever, and you can get back to your phone, but for a moment-in-time, leave Siri alone, and talk with someone who has blood running through their veins just like you.

- **Visualize, and then practice, entering a room where you anticipate you will not know a soul.** Practice how you will walk into the room and how you might approach an individual or a group of folks chatting. Visualize what you might do if others have their phone out and what actions you might take to encourage others to put their phones down too. Walk through the steps of arrival, start by establishing a mindset of “I belong here” and assume that your presence is welcomed and that you share something in common with the host and probably many other attendees too.
- **Anticipate and prepare for a "small talk, no real agenda" face-to-face interaction.** Think of, and research a bit, two or three topical areas (stay away from religion or politics) that you would like to talk about and/or learn about from others. Be a listener and a learner before you are a contributor. Recognize that a "what are your thoughts on xyz" question can be a valuable part of having a healthy engagement. Prepare to be the first one to speak. Show interest in others first, without asking them to show interest in you. Know that the door to a quality engagement swings wide open when you prepare for, anticipate, and fully ready yourself to be curious and listen through a non-judgmental ear.

So the next time you find yourself in a new face-to-face intergenerational environment, go ahead and reach for your phone, turn it off/put it away, and give those around you the gift of a fully present and engaged you.

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