

Technology and Stress

by Kathleen Monahan and James Nolan

Most technological advances have been meant to make life easier. However, technology does not come without a price, and sometimes, in an attempt to make life easier one way, we actually make it harder in another.

As the rate of technological change quickened in the late nineteenth century, some writers questioned the human cost. In 1891, a doctor named George M. Beard wrote an essay entitled "Causes of American Nervousness." In this treatise, Dr. Beard connected the increase in nervous disorders with the advance of technology. The clock and watch, for example, were blamed for making people worry too much about time and the pressure of schedules: "We are under constant strain, mostly unconscious, oftentimes in sleeping as well as in waking hours, to get somewhere or do something at some definite moment."

The telegraph, while speeding communication, added to the anxiety of business managers and workers. Before the telegraph, information on changing prices and business conditions had been slow. The new invention transmitted price and market data around the world in hours, and businesses were

pressed to keep pace with it. Improvements in machinery increased production but required specialization. Workers no longer made a complete product. Instead they worked all day on one small task, performed over and over. This specialization was "depressing both to mind and body."

Dr. Beard observed, too, that the industrial world was a noisy place and that the sounds emitted by machines and engines were jarring and harmful to the nerves. He explained that the sounds of nature, however loud, are rhythmical and harmonious, while the new mechanical sounds were harsh and grating.

Few changes have ever arrived unchallenged. Many writers of the nineteenth century were enthusiastic about the stunning progress of their century. However, some, like Dr. Beard, asked whether life really was easier, or whether people weren't running harder and faster to keep up with their machines.

Today's computers, faxes, e-mail, overnight delivery, and other more modern technologies have increased the speed of our lives even more. Ask your parents and other adults if they have noticed other changes as a result.

