

Tales of tech, texts and tendon trauma

Me and my numb thumb: Burning joints, and not in a good way

By Nellie Bowles



Kimberly Salt / New York Times

It took me a few months to accept that I had given myself tendinitis in my phone thumb.

It is a depressingly modern condition in which the tendons around the thumb inflame as a result of repetitive strain — in my case because I had, for hours a day over years of a life, tapped that right-hand digit onto the glass of my smartphone.

The condition sounds like the subject of a local television news trend story about teenagers whose thumbs seize up while they play video games. It was definitely not something I, a mature professional, should ever have. I began to call it my numb thumb.

I had tried to prevent it, using other fingers on my phone when I felt early signs of pain. But they typed too slowly, so I stuck with my thumb, pressing it down to unlock the screen, and then using it to jab out texts and emails.

Eventually, my right thumb just stopped working. It could not muster the strength to press down on my phone. It was both numb and achy. And the pain that had started in my hand was now shooting down my arm. I had a problem, one I later learned is becoming common.

Suddenly, friends and co-workers all seemed to have similar stories about their thumbs, plus wrist braces I could borrow. And experts told me that although there is plenty of discussion about how teenagers are addicted to technology, adults are actually hit the hardest.

My doctor, who had me make a painful fist, said that I might have something called De Quervain's Tendinitis, which affects tendons on the thumb side of the wrist and is caused by chronic overuse of those tendons. He admonished me about tech addiction and about how if I continued this way, I would need surgery.

He sent me for acupuncture, which I had never tried before.

"It's a crisis," said Sanjeev Kakar, an orthopedic surgeon at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota who specializes in hand injuries and has seen an increase in the number of thumb "overuse cases." Kakar said he had noticed that the condition is spreading among adults and older people in particular.

"Your joints are a little stiffer," he told me. "Your tendons aren't as pliable as they used to be."

He added that numbness could be an early sign of carpal tunnel syndrome or, perhaps, nerve compression that is typically associated with competitive bowling.

Do I bowl? I do not bowl.

I called it numb, but it was also very painful, I told Kakar. He seemed relieved. The best cure, he said, was to stop using the thumb for a while.

“Change your texting behavior,” he said. That sounds logical and easy — until you try to email left-handed.

Adults with tech-related injuries often refuse to admit they have a problem until injuries and addictive behavior progress to an extreme, said Nancy Ann Cheever, a professor of communications at Cal State Dominguez Hills, who studies technology and addiction.

“We assume teenagers are using their phones more, but it’s actually not the case, because younger people tend to have a lot more awareness of their smartphone use,” she said. “They have a more complete understanding of the harmful effects of smartphone use because they’ve been taught about it since they were kids.”

Cheever has just completed a study of how anxious people get when they hear their phones receiving texts that they have been told not to answer. She measured their heart rates and how much they sweat.

“Very stressed,” she said, summarizing the preliminary results.

When I recently walked into the office of Michelle Kuroda, a San Francisco acupuncturist, she said I was one of the lucky ones. She had just had two patients whose phone hands hurt so much that they had had to take leaves of absence from work.

“They were dropping things,” Kuroda said. “They couldn’t eat with forks.”

She said that it was unnatural to concentrate so much movement in one digit on such a small flat surface.

“We’re not meant to just use our thumbs all the time,” she said. “We’re meant to use all our fingers. That’s what our grip is for.”

She said the reason some people get phone thumb and others do not often comes down to stress.

Cortisol and adrenaline, which the body releases when it feels stress, make one prone to inflammation and contribute to conditions like the one I was experiencing. She asked if I felt stressed, and I described a typical day monitoring Twitter.

“You kind of have a preexisting condition just because of your lifestyle,” she said.

Kuroda left me with a cluster of needles in my hand and arm and told me to do body scans for an hour. She also prescribed several antidotes. They included turmeric, an anti-inflammatory, and cannabidiol, a nonpsychotropic marijuana plant extract more commonly known as CBD.

Panic over tech and addiction comes and goes. When a new study comes out with jarring numbers or a fancy new gadget hits the market, the flurry of stories and conversations will start anew.

We tell ourselves the bigger issue must be among the teenagers. And quickly we all get over it.

After a few weeks of resting my right thumb, it felt a lot better and almost completely back to normal. I use my left hand now — quite a lot, in fact.

Nellie Bowles is a New York Times writer.

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