

# Stop Tracking Your Loved Ones

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On a busy weekend, my husband, Brandon, took our three children to the park so I could work. When he didn't respond to my text asking him to hit the grocery store on the way home and I couldn't track him on Find My Friends, I called. With the music blaring and all four of my boys singing loudly off-key, my every-two-minute phone calls went unnoticed. All eight of them.

In my mind, I conjured images of a horrible car accident—my entire family gone in an instant. After 15 minutes, I became so unhinged that I left the house and started driving the route they would take to get home while asking Siri to dial again. As I turned the corner onto the main street, I spotted our van. Then, a few seconds later, I saw Brandon's head bobbing to the music as I passed him going the other direction.

I had to ask myself: Was having the ability to immediately reach a loved one—or at least pinpoint their location—stressing me out? Nancy Colier, a New York-based licensed clinical social worker, reverend, and author of *The Power of Off: The Mindful Way to Stay Sane in a Virtual World*, tells me my neurosis of needing to reach people instantly isn't an anomaly in the digital age. In fact, Colier says, with all of the texting, monitoring, and tracking, most of us are living in a constant state of anxiety.

“It used to be that we would go for long periods without knowing where someone was,” Colier says. “Now, there has been a paradigm shift from 'the world is a safe place we can trust' to 'if we don't micromanage and control every moment, something terrible will happen.’”

Yet there's plenty of evidence to suggest our loved ones, friends, and even our children are safer in the world today than they were in the 1990s—in terms of violent crime, child abductions, and motor vehicle accidents. Plus, in the unlikely event of an actual emergency, authorities can use cell phone tower data to locate our broods. So do we really need tracking technology?

## Manage Your Tracking Impulses

For most people, monitoring family members' movements typically begins as a virtuous pursuit. Parents, spouses, and anyone concerned about an elderly relative can use apps like Life 360, mSpy, and FamiSafe to make sure their loved ones are safe—and that they can reach them in an emergency. (Although we strongly advise against using such apps, for a variety of reasons.)

In recent years, I've relied on Find My Friends as a sort of crystal ball that reassures me everything is as it should be. I use it to make sure my mom, siblings, and husband have made it from point A to point B, and in Brandon's case to find out if he's left the office. A bonus: Letting family members track me has lifted the burden of needing to check in when I get where I'm going.

But in an era when parents can monitor their kids' every move, teens follow their crush's digital footprint, and spouses like me freak out when their families go dark for 15 minutes, a growing number of experts are questioning whether it's healthy to be this connected to our loved ones.

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“One of the biggest risks these technologies pose is they make us more neurotic,” says Pamela Wisniewski, an associate professor at the University of Central Florida whose research focuses on the intersection of human-computer interaction, social computing, and privacy. “If all we're getting is metadata that someone isn't where we expect them to be, that can make us anxious.” It can even cause us to leap to erroneous conclusions that sabotage our daily activities.

While these technologies are intended to mitigate risk, at their worst, tracking apps can trigger problematic false alarms when there's a glitch. Take the time I saw my mom seemingly stuck two blocks from her home. When I realized her location hadn't moved in 30 minutes, I worried she had taken a spill while walking the dog. It turns out her battery died while she was strolling through the neighborhood.

“We have this sort of magical thinking that if we know where our loved ones are, we can somehow save them from a dangerous world,” says David Greenfield, PhD, ABPP, and founder and director of The Center for Internet and Technology Addiction. The apps are

marketing to our primal fear of disconnecting from our loved ones. But is the benefit of *perceived* safety worth the excess anxiety? Or is there more bliss in ignorance?

### Consider Tracking Pitfalls

The truth is, there are legitimate reasons why you might not want someone to track your every move. "It could be as virtuous as someone wanting to buy a surprise gift for a loved one, or maybe something a little risky, like a teen wanting to be alone with her boyfriend," says Wisniewski. "To some extent, that boundary-pushing, that privacy, is healthy, particularly during the teenage years."

Each socially rewarding reason to use tracking tech comes with a privacy-related or anxiety-inducing consequence. The most obvious pitfall: Tracking breeds a lack of trust, especially when it's used to police kids' behavior.

"You're not only feeding your own anxiety, but you're also communicating that you don't think your kid can hack it in the real world without your help—and that can have devastating consequences for you, your child, and your relationship," Greenfield says. It can even impact their ability to successfully launch into adulthood.

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For example, kids who are tracked may not become as self-reliant as their untracked counterparts. "Children develop a sense of confidence when they're encouraged to go out into the world without safety nets," says Greenfield. "They make mistakes, trip and fall, run out of gas, and they become more competent as a result."

Experts agree that trust, privacy, and the opportunity to make mistakes—and grow from them—trump the sense of perceived safety we get from consistent monitoring. "If you're using geo-tracking to find out if your kid is on his way home so you can start making dinner, that's a healthy use," says Wisniewski. "But if it gets to the point of obsessive monitoring, that's unhealthy surveillance."

What's more concerning: Tracking technologies could place your loved ones at greater risk. When teens know parents are following their every move, they may [find ways to disable location-sharing](#), Wisniewski says. They buy burner phones, remove batteries from their devices, power down. Then, in a true emergency, even the police can't pinpoint their exact location.

## Pause Before Stalking

Once I recognized the angst that came with tracking, I decided to take a different approach. Instead of gripping tighter to gain more control, I identified ways to surrender and let go.

“The idea is to interrupt the addictive and unconscious impulse to react to our 'not knowing what to do with ourselves' feeling,” Colier says. “More often than not, tracking and constant communication is a way to avoid the silence of spending time with ourselves.”

Now, when I'm about to check Find My Friends or fire off a “where are you?” text, I pause, take a breath, and ask myself, *Why am I tracking? Do I really need to know this person's location? Or am I trying to escape some other feeling? Then, What does it feel like to sit with the discomfort without anesthetizing it with communication and content?*

Once I realized I didn't have to respond to every thought—that I could allow the unlikely tragic scenario to play out in my mind without acting on it—I felt more at ease. I also began turning to meditation apps such as [Calm](#), [Headspace](#), [Insight Timer](#), and [Ten Percent Happier](#). After flexing that muscle for a few weeks, I was finally able to power down my device during times of stress and focus on breathing (knowing that if I *really* need to make an emergency call, Alexa is at the ready).

Can't allow yourself to power down? Myriad apps and tools can help you develop healthier tech use. I discovered that calendaring applications like [Calendly](#) and [Cozi](#) allow me to monitor the big picture—I know which events and activities my loved ones have on the books so I don't need up-to-the-minute tracking of their every move. And instead of constant monitoring, I use text messaging to check in when I can't tolerate the low-level worry.

I've also enabled features that use push alerts in real emergencies rather than passive surveillance. [Apple SOS](#), for example, sends your emergency contacts automatic text messages containing your location whenever you make an emergency SOS call. And [Google's crisis alert](#) tool allows you to share your location with others when an emergency (earthquake, school shooting, fire, or flood) happens near you.

“You have to become aware of which technologies and communications stress you out and which help you feel more at ease, which apps add to your quality of life and which detract from it,” says Colier.

Admittedly, I haven't disabled Find My Friends. But now my mom and Brandon are the only people I track—and I no longer use the feature daily or even weekly. Instead, if I'm feeling anxious, I remind myself that there's a good chance my loved ones are safe and I send them a text message—“I hope you're singing at the top of your lungs.” Then I turn off my notifications and open Ten Percent Happier.

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