

The Tyranny of the Group Chat

My phone buzzed forty times during a single dinner last week, and not one message was addressed to me specifically. That's the group chat for you. It arrived without fanfare and quietly rewrote the rules of friendship, and most of us never stopped to ask whether we agreed to the new terms. The group chat has manufactured a form of social obligation that nobody consciously chose, and it deserves far more scrutiny than the cheerful little bubble on our screens ever invites.

The core problem is that a group chat never actually ends, and this permanence changes what participation means. A phone call has a beginning and a hang-up; a dinner concludes when people go home. A group chat, by contrast, simply continues, which means the pressure to keep up never fully releases. Miss a few hours and you return to ninety unread messages, an inside joke you can't decode, and a plan that got made and finalized without you. I've felt the guilt of "leaving people on read" even when the conversation was just reaction emojis and memes. Studies on digital communication point to exactly this strain, noting that the expectation of constant availability raises stress and blurs the line between rest and responsiveness. We answer not because we have something to say, but because silence now reads as absence, or worse, as rudeness.

None of this means group chats are worthless, since they genuinely hold scattered friendships together. The point is that we adopted them without negotiating the cost, and the cost is a low,

persistent hum of obligation we rarely name. Recognizing that hum is the first step toward muting it, occasionally, without apology.