

A growing app-session



Apps allow us to track our calories, our running performance, our finances, how well we sleep and even how much sex we are getting. **JOHANNA LEGGATT** asks, 'Is it time we became a little bit more picky about how we benchmark our lives?'

WHEN Elena Zuban decided to take up meditation a little more than a year ago, the digital creative threw herself at it with the full weight of her technological know-how.

In a bid to motivate herself, the 26-year-old downloaded 10 different meditation apps, which, in an amusing twist, became extremely stressful to manage.

"All of these apps kept sending me notifications throughout the day and asking me whether I had meditated yet," Zuban says. "It was actually very stressful and not relaxing at all, which was the point of downloading the meditation apps in the first place."

Zuban has since deleted all but the most essential of apps on her devices. Skype, Facebook, a couple of note-based organising apps, Pandora and only one meditation app are all that remain.

The less-is-more app lesson prompted Zuban, who runs her own digital media company, to ponder the difference between a good app and a time-waster and eventually led her to build her own app, CharmSafe.

It is an SMS check-up service for people who feel anxious in social situations. This may be based on a genuine fear of public places or could be that a single woman going on a date wants the comfort of knowing she will be checked in with.

"The person receives a text message asking if everything is OK while they are out and if they text back 'SOS', then it is transferred to a nominated emergency contact," Zuban says. "Apps should be a way of helping people and that is what I wanted to do by building my own."

Zuban is passionate about what constitutes a good app, but most of us put very little thought into their role in our lives — we see them as tools, childlike entertainment and often a source of mindless distraction. Let's take one of the world's most popular gaming apps, Candy Crush Saga, as an example. According to gaming figures released last year, some 93 million people play Candy Crush Saga more than one billion times a day.

"Imagine what people could do with their time if they played less Candy Crush," says Simon Waller, digital business coach and author of *Analogosaurus: Avoiding Extinction in a World of Digital Business*. "They could volunteer, or engage with other people."

Waller, 38, lives and breathes apps as part of his business. While he thinks some of the apps we use to track our lives — or even to entertain us — are fantastic, he believes people don't use them judiciously.

"People generally fall into two categories: there are those who know nothing about apps and so they don't engage with them at all or they are not sure which ones are good so they download all of them," he says. "Technology should enhance your life and a good app will be a tool to help you."

Waller stresses that apps can't — or at least they shouldn't — replace the face-to-face aspect of communication.

"And it's a very hard line to draw but I think deep down people know when they have crossed a line. They know when the technology is interfering with their life to too great an extent."

And it's not just marathon Candy Crush Saga gaming sessions that have the potential to absorb so much of our free time. Our apps have become an important functionary in our lives — telling us how many kilometres we have run, how much sleep we are getting, who to date (take a bow, Tinder) and, thanks to a new reproductive health tracking app that Apple is planning to release in coming months, how much sex we are having.

All this tracking leaves very little of our lives untouched by the comprehensive data analysis of the all-pervasive app.

But is this necessarily a bad thing?

Not according to tech whiz Megan Iemma, who uses tracking apps to organise her life and business. Iemma has about 100 apps downloaded to her iPad, although there are another 800 on her iTunes account.

"I use an app that tracks my sleeping and that has