

Computer Psychiatry

My partner and I are what you would probably call seniors (late 70s). Sometimes we get the impression that civilization is passing us by, especially when it comes to electronic devices.

It all started with the computer. Our first one was an ancient Mac SE given to me by my daughter many years ago when I told her I was thinking of writing my memoirs. She assured me I would find it ever so easy to use. I found it quite the contrary, and several times I nearly gave it up as hopeless. Subsequently, after having progressed through several other computers of ever-increasing complexity, I have to admit that old SE was probably the friendliest and best behaved of them all.

Nothing in my training as an engineer or Mary's as a schoolteacher prepared us for dealing with computer psychiatry. This unruly PC I am now using is prone to exhibiting the strangest spasms, such as quitting in the middle of some standard routine because, so it claims, things have suddenly gone bad. This is especially vexing when we haven't done anything to provoke it. Most frustrating of all are those endless closed loops or complete paralysis, where the only escape is to cut off life support and start over again. But we are learning to cope with these idiosyncrasies, for all the amazing things it can do when it is in one of its good moods.

Then there is the VCR. Our first one, about fifteen years ago, came with no remote and only a couple pages of instructions that you didn't really need. Just stick in the tape and play. Its replacement was much more complicated, but I finally managed to master the only new feature that interested us, which was to record our favorite TV program while we were away. Our present VCR came with 62 pages of confusing instructions, most of which I have not attempted to digest, since nearly all of the features they try to explain are meaningless to us. I have not yet even figured out how to program the timer. Worse still is a related problem with the remote for our TV. Sometimes one of us will hit one of several mysterious wrong buttons in the dark, and it can take seemingly forever to get things back to normal, all the while missing our favorite program.

There have been countless other challenges, like resetting the clocks for daylight saving time in our two cars. They are both the same make and nearly identical, but the clocks are completely different, and as many times as I have done it, I still have to get out the manuals. Same applies to my digital watch. Certainly not like the good old days, when you just turned a knob.

And cell phones! Eight years ago, we decided to go hi-tech and start carrying a cell phone for possible emergencies. We never had any emergencies so hardly ever used it. Charged it just once a year. Recently we were informed by our phone company that our old analog cell phone was obsolete and must be replaced by a GSM, whatever that is. The

new phone came with 44 pages of confusing instructions, describing a bewildering assortment of amazing features, none of which we wanted or even understood. When I requested just a simple cell phone instead, I was told this is now the simplest one made. Oddly, what really stumped us was simply turning it on and off. Nowhere in the thick instruction book was this explained, and after being placed on hold for half an hour, even the phone company could not tell us how. At one point, I became so convinced it was impossible to turn off that I considered carrying it with the battery removed. But then I had to agree with Mary, not very practical in an emergency. Finally a friend came to our rescue and explained that the red button must be held down for three seconds. Evidently it is assumed everyone knows that gimmick by now, except perhaps the elderly and the feeble minded.

You might think that someone with a technical background would have some slight advantage in coping with these idiosyncratic gadgets, but I'm not so sure. Just as I write this, we have made the big switch from rooftop antenna to cable TV. The associated electronics must have been designed with the same wanton disregard for our sanity as went into our computer innards. You might expect the same keys on the remote to at least produce the same good or bad results each time. But alas, like the computer, our cable box has a mind of its own, and you never know for sure what just what is going to happen. I have to wonder if we are seeing a trend in all this. Please, can someone just figure out a way to make things simpler for us old folks? We don't really need all those mysterious extra features, just something basic and simple.