

Does Technology Interfere with Your Relationship?

Objective

To identify the ways that technology is affecting your relationship and to identify concrete steps to change behaviors that interfere with building a trusting and fulfilling relationship.

You Should Know

Technology has changed the way we live, including our intimate relationships. With the increased use of email, texting, instant messaging, and social media, couples are wired up more than ever. In some ways this change has been for the better, as it is easier for people to be connected and to communicate their thoughts and needs. But in other ways, technology can get in the way of authentic communication and intimacy.

Many couples struggle to find a balance. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center poll, one in four cell phone owners in a relationship or marriage found their partner too distracted by their cell phone. Nearly 1 in 10 had argued with a partner about their spending too much time on their devices. Couples in the poll noted that they argue frequently about their use of technology. And for those who reported that their partner is “addicted” to devices, perhaps something else is going on that is causing this behavior in the first place—depression, anxiety, or pre-existing problems in the relationship. Others who don’t report addictive use still complain that their partner is frequently distracted by sounds or notifications, like a dog salivating to Pavlov’s ringing bell. Those interruptions can cause you to feel anywhere from annoyed to ignored to abandoned.

Another study of 143 married women, conducted by Brandon McDaniel, PhD, a professor at Penn State University, concluded the following:

- 62% said technology interferes with their leisure time together.
- 40% said their partner gets distracted by the TV during a conversation.
- 35% said their partner will pull out his phone if he receives a notification even if they are in the middle of a conversation.
- 33% said their partner checks his phone during mealtimes that they spend together.
- 25% said their partner actively texts other people during the couple’s face-to-face conversations.

Do these patterns sound familiar? In this worksheet, you will look at how technology is affecting your relationship both in good and bad ways, and then identify concrete steps you can take to keep your technology habits in check.

What to Do

Write down the devices and applications you use on a regular basis and estimate how much time you spend per day on each device, noting the mode of communication (e.g., text, email, IM, social media, etc.). For help in assessing your device time, install a time-tracking app such as Moment or OFFTIME to gather data.

Device/App/Mode of Communication

Estimated Time Spent Daily

Now, write down the devices your partner uses and estimate how much time s/he spends on that device.

Device/App/Mode of Communication

Estimated Time Spent Daily

What are the positive effects on your relationship of your and your partner's use of technology, for example, convenient for planning, sharing thoughts and feelings, sharing news, etc.

What are the negative effects of your and your partner’s use of technology, for example, lack of face-to-face time, difficulty having a conversation without interruption, irritability, depression, or moodiness.

Now, for those items on your list of the negative effects, make a plan to sit down with your partner to discuss how you both can change your use of technology. Here are some suggestions from experts. In the space below the list, write down what you are willing to try in the next week or so:

- Share, in person, your concerns with your partner. Resist the urge to hide behind the “safety” and “anonymity” of texting or emails.
- Make a plan to reduce time on devices—set a goal of limiting tech use to a specific number of minutes per day. Then stick to it.
- Alternatively, carefully *schedule in* your use of technology (e.g., 7:00 to 7:15; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)
- Install a blocking app that restricts your access to social media.
- No texting during meals.
- Shut off all devices an hour before bedtime. Talk! Be sure to make eye contact.
- Schedule other device-free time together to share your thoughts and feelings.
- Make time to be in nature, walking, hiking, doing shared activities.
- Introduce a weekly device-free romantic “date night.”
- Take a meditation or yoga class together.
- Go to the gym.

Setting limits and finding alternatives to technology is something you can do together—make compromises if necessary; that is, if you must keep your phone on because your kids might call, do not take any other calls or texts during that time. Add your own ideas here:

More to Think About

1. Which of the alternatives to using technology listed above seem the easiest and most fun for you? Explain.

2. Which alternatives seem the most challenging? Explain.

3. Of the challenging alternatives you identified, which one can you commit to trying within the next week or so, despite your resistance, in order to improve your relationship?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else could you do differently to make progress in this area?
