

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Are Gadget-Free Bedrooms the Secret to a Happy Relationship?

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New York Times -- Sound the alarm: The good old-fashioned relationship is under attack from technology.

That seems to be the message from a growing body of psychology research examining how technology is affecting our love lives and friendships.

For many couples, technology is a double-edged sword. The “his” and “hers” towels have been replaced by smartphones that allow people to stay tethered all day, whether it’s to share shopping lists or heart-shaped emoji. But those same couples get into tiffs when one person pulls out a cellphone at dinner or clicks on the iPad before bed, forgoing

pillow talk for Twitter.

A study published last month in *The International Journal of Neuropsychotherapy*, for example, found that when one person in a relationship is using some forms of technology more than the other, it makes the second person feel ignored and insecure. Or as your therapist may say, it brings up a whole lot of abandonment issues.

“Engaging in technology separate to a partner while in the presence of them encourages a disconnection rather than a connection,” said Christina Leggett, a senior researcher at the School of Psychology at the University of Queensland in Australia, who wrote the study with Pieter J. Rossouw, a professor there. “Disconnection in relationships tends to lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and comprises an individual’s sense of safety, attachment and control.”

In a study published this year, Pew Research found that 25 percent of cellphone users in a relationship believed that their partner was distracted by that person’s cellphone when they were together. Eight percent said they had argued about how much time one party spends online.

In 2013, a study by Brigham Young University researchers concluded that texting too much within a relationship could leave partners very dissatisfied with their overall communication. (Saying “sorry” over text in an argument only made things worse, the same study found.) And in 2012, researchers at the Baylor University Hankamer School of Business found that paying too much attention to a cellphone could ruin relationships with loved ones and friends.

“Phubbing your significant other by giving precedence to your phone activities over paying attention to your significant other is a path to strained relationships,” James Roberts, a professor at Baylor who wrote the 2012 study, wrote in an email, using the shorthand term for “phone snubbing.” “When one or both people in a couple overuse (variously defined) their cellphone, or other technology, it is likely to undermine their relationship.”

One way to find a balance, according to researchers I spoke with, is to organize device-free outings with your significant other. That could include weekend hikes in areas without cell service or leaving phones at home during brunch. (Sorry: That means you won’t be able to Instagram your eggs Benedict.)

At home, where it’s more difficult to escape the clutches of tech, researchers suggested setting up gadget-free zones, where laptops, iPads and other devices are banned. Dr. Rossouw said that he tells people to make the bedroom a “sacred space free from technology.” He also noted that couples who work from home should be especially cognizant of this, creating strict boundaries for where tech is allowed and where it’s not. Continue reading the main story Continue reading the main story Continue reading the main story

But take it from me, setting up gadget-free zones isn’t easy.

My fiancée and I are currently in a standoff about our gadget-free bedroom. From her perspective, there should not be any gadgets in the bedroom except an alarm clock. While I think this is fair, I’ve argued that if I was reading a book on my iPad, then that

device should be exempt from the ban. And a Kindle, which could be seen as a print book with a fancy reading light, should be perfectly O.K., too. (She disagrees, hence the standoff.)

One solution, if things get really extreme, could be installing wallpaper in the bedroom that can block Wi-Fi signals from coming in or out. Though if you get to that point, you may have bigger problems.

If you think a Kindle is tricky, wait until your significant other starts wearing the Apple Watch next year. Are you going to ask your husband or wife to take off the watch before coming into the gadget-free bedroom?

But tech in a relationship isn't all bad. In fact, if used correctly, it can actually bring couples closer together. Ms. Leggett and Dr. Rossouw's study found that couples who used technology together — watching TV, for example — can make people feel more connected in their relationship. (Quick, grab the popcorn and a good rom-com.) The researchers even found that couples using their cellphone together “while engaging and interacting with each other” could be positive. (Words With Friends, darling?)

Some experts who study the effects of tech on relationships say that the cons of tech don't outweigh the pros.

“Being able to stay in touch with loved ones when they are not physically present is a benefit that ought not be underestimated,” said Michael J. Rosenfeld, an associate professor of sociology at Stanford University, who wrote a breakthrough paper in 2012 about technology and relationships. “I don't disagree that technology can distract us away from the people who are most physically proximate, but I see no evidence that our relationships are diminished by technology.”

Whether you're all for unlimited gadget use in a relationship, or against it, you can probably agree that finding a balance in this tech-replete world is increasingly difficult.

Yet whatever couples decide to do, one thing is clear: The boundaries people collectively decide upon in a relationship now will set the bar for what's acceptable in a good old-fashioned relationship of the future. That is, until it comes under attack from the next wave of distracting tech products.