

Lee: Death by Technology. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 202.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Can technology kill a marriage? Modern technology can do almost anything from translating a foreign language to shooting angry birds at random objects. No one would have ever suspected that something that could be so helpful with so many things could be at the root of all of their marital problems.

Today's overabundance of technology can take away a couple's time with one another, and replace it with hours in front of the computer. Is your marriage strong enough to withstand the attacks from technology? Jill Eilenberger has a Master's Degree in Clinical Social Work from UNC, and has been working as a psychotherapist for 25 years.

Jill is a licensed clinical social worker, marital and family therapist, and Imago relationship therapist. Jill is a former president of the Charlotte chapter of the American Association of Marital and Family Therapists, and has been listed in the Who's Who of American Women. Jill now runs her own private practice out of Charlotte, North Carolina. Jill, welcome to the show. I'm so glad you could join us.

Jill: Thank you, Lee. It's a pleasure to be here.

Lee: The idea of technology is to make life easier, to have everything built around your schedule, not to have to build your schedule around the technology. What's the situation that you're seeing today with couples and their technology consumption habits?

Jill: Oh, they have less time together. They're feeling detached and distant. There's a lack of connection between them. They feel like each other is ignoring each other. Arguments and blame begin.

Lee: Interesting. I would have thought that the technology might have the opposite effect. Things with your phone today, where you can easily call when you're mobile, or you can text easily. I would have thought that might have even resulted in better communication between couples. Is that not the case?

Jill: Well, when you say couples, I'm assuming you mean married couples.

Lee: Right.

Jill: It's different if two people just met each other, then they may be texting each other like crazy, even on work time. A married couple often ends up, maybe they'll text during the day about who's going to pick up milk on the way home from the grocery store, or something quick like, "Do you want to go out with the Jones' this Friday night?" The problem is, once they get home and that's where they could be really relating, they're both

maybe, trying to cook dinner together, feed the child, and they even put the child to bed, but they each keep breaking from that to answer the phone or answer emails. They end up feeling like the other person isn't really with them.

Lee: Yeah. Yeah. Now, I can certainly see that. Is it even worse today? I think we've always heard about couples where the television is on all the time, for instance, and they're not paying attention to each other. Do you think between iPads and laptops and the smartphones and all of that, that things are even worse today?

Jill: Yes, I do. I think couples who want to stay married should turn off all that technology when they come home, and have true family life.

Lee: Interesting. Interesting. Tell me about that. What do you recommend for a couple when you see this becoming a problem in the relationship?

Jill: Well, I recommend that they turn the technology off, and the whole family cook dinner together, eat dinner together, and everyone get ready for their evening. Pay attention to one another. Then, once the children are in bed, I suggest a couple do something called Imago Intentional Couple's Dialogue.

Imago is a type of marital therapy developed by Mr. and Mrs. Harville. Helen Hunt Harville, oh no wait. I'm saying that wrong. Harville Hendrix and his wife, Helen. Anyway, it has several parts to it. The first part is the husband might listen to the wife ventilate for a few minutes, and he mirrors her what he's hearing. Then, step two is giving a summary of what he thinks he heard. Then, the next step is validation, and the fourth step is giving empathy. Then, after one person has had their turn to ventilate about anything, absolutely anything. Good, bad, neutral, something to do with the two of them, or it could be something that happened in the day. Then they switch roles.

This keeps the two being good listeners to one another, in the habit of mirroring one another a little bit, in the habit of validating and developing better and better skills at knowing each other's feelings, knowing each other's responses to certain situations and staying in the habit of giving one another empathy.

Lee: Right. OK. I think that's a great approach, but let's say you're listening to this program today, and you want to use this approach with your spouse. You go home tonight, and you want to talk to your spouse about it, but they won't look up from the iPad. They're totally immersed in a game or reading, or whatever it is on the device. How can you talk to them about this, about getting them engaged in this kind of conversation without it turning into an argument? We don't want to sound critical or like we're attacking our spouse, but we want them to give up the iPad for an hour and talk to us. How do we approach that?

Jill: OK. Any time you're tempted to criticize your spouse, that means you have an unmet need. It's far better to just walk over to your spouse and try to make eye contact, and say, "I need something from you. I need such and such, or I'm longing for such and such, or

please, may I have this gift of love? Will you please turn that off and just sit with me and talk to me?"

Lee: Yeah. Yeah. That does sound like a much better approach. Those of us that use technology a lot, and I think some people describe it as an addiction even, that's not going to change overnight. I mean, we're not going to turn it off today and be done with it, but obviously we all have a limited amount of free time to engage with our spouses. How do you help couples make compromises between this whole issue of personal time and technology time?

Jill: OK. I want to suggest that couples have one scheduled hour per week where they sit down and talk about marital issues and develop marital policies along the way. In a situation like that, they might create a marital policy where every night after the child is in bed, at a certain time they have a good half hour together, without technology where they're making eye contact with one another.

Lee: How do you make that the routine so that it lasts, so it doesn't just kind of happen for a week or two and then it gets forgotten?

Jill: Well, it's important to make it rewarding. Human beings crave connection, so when they're practicing the Intentional Couple's Dialogue and making each other feel heard and understood, it's exciting. It brings back those feelings of exhilaration and mystery that they had back when they met. It starts kicking in the passion again. It brings back those new, excited feelings.

Lee: OK. Obviously, you're a big advocate of this Imago Couple's Dialogue. It makes sense to me. Is this something you do for a month, a couple of months, and then you're back up and running and good to go? What do you do with this? How long do you keep doing this?

Jill: This is a lifetime habit. Once those children are old enough that you can leave them alone in the house, it's great to go for a walk together. When you're walking ten minutes down the street, one of you is the sender and the other is the receiver, then you turn around and when you're coming back to the house, you switch roles. This is how you keep your good habits going of good listening skills, proving nightly you're a good listener and you respect your partner enough to actually listen to him or her. To show that you're listening that you have enough control over your emotional reactivity that you're not going to interrupt and start defending yourself or giving your opinion. But that you're going to really listen, that you can just breath deeply and slowly and keep yourself calm, and show your partner that you have enough respect to listen.

Lee: Right. Right. Good advice. Now, given the time constraints that everybody feels today between working and dealing with kid issues, household issues, not to mention the technology, what do you see as the amount of time that a couple really needs to spend in this sort of connection, where they're doing the sort of things you're talking about? What's

the minimum amount of time that you can commit to the marriage that's going to keep it going?

Jill: Twenty minutes a night.

Lee: Wow. That's not nearly what I would have guessed you were going to say. Do you think doing this Imago discussion that you're talking about, 20 minutes a night is enough?

Jill: I'm talking eye contact and paying close attention to one another. You know, quality time. I realize other people don't like the phrase quality time, but I mean technology is off and they're looking at one another and they are communicating.

Lee: Right. Right. Really staying engaged.

Jill: People yearn for connectivity. They want closeness, and this gives them that. Things like Facebook and the other social networking deals are fun for light relationships and all kinds of good working light connections, but it's not the same thing as being in a relationship having family time, or intimate conversation. Closeness, a feeling of connection where you really know your partner. Someone you're familiar with. Someone you've had consistency with.

Lee: Right. Right. Absolutely. Excellent advice. Well, you have given some very helpful, very concise advice. I like that. I like knowing exactly what to do to get things back on track. I think everybody finds that helpful. Is there anything else you feel like you should pass along to us today before we run?

Jill: When you're in an intimate relationship, it's kind of like the ocean waves the way they go up and down. You have to ride out the rough times, the rough waters. You have to ride it out because you'll get back to that wonderful, smooth sailing kind of time. It's worth it to hang in there.

Lee: Back to smooth sailing. Great advice. Jill, thank you so much for being with us on the program today.

Jill: It's a pleasure.

Lee: To find out more about Jill Eilenberger, you can visit her website at Jilleilenberger.com. I'm going to put a link to that in the show notes, but let me spell it out for you. It's a long one. It's J-I-L-L-E-I-L-E-N-B-E-R-G-E-R.com. You can also reach her office at 704-591-0648.

Thank you so much for listening in today. I really appreciate the fact that you were here. We love hearing your feedback, comments, ideas about future shows. You can reach us a couple of different ways. You can call our listener comment line at 919-256-3083, or you can email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com, or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.