

Scott Blair: Is technology negatively affecting your relationship? This is Stay Happily Married episode number 312.

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

Scott: I'm Scott Blair and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is technology negatively affecting your relationship? In today's society we have more technology than we know what to do with. It is outstanding to see how much we rely on it, too. In an average household, you may find a cellphone for each member of the family, a laptop, and a couple of tablets. Essentially, these are all types of mobile computers that allow us to be connected with one another every second of every day. We eventually become hard pressed to find any alone time when we have our cellphones constantly with us. When someone texts us, we text back as soon as we receive it. When someone calls, we answer whether we are busy doing something or not. We constantly refresh our emails and social media pages. With us constantly being attached to our technology, are our relationships suffering? Do we actually have good quality time when we're on the phone when we are together? In reality, do we become more disconnected with our loved ones when we are always on our phones and tablets? Earning her master's degree in marriage and family therapy from East Carolina University, Jamie Criswell is managing partner of Foundations Family Therapy in Fuquay-Varina, North Carolina. Jamie is a licensed marriage and family therapist who has been serving individuals, couples, and families in different capacities for over five years. She has served clients in outpatient, inpatient, and community settings. In addition to working with couples, Jamie has experienced working with domestic violence, substance abuse, crisis stabilization, and child behavioral problems. Jamie is committed to further education and advancing the field of marriage and family therapy and currently serves as the treasurer for the North Carolina Association of Marriage and Family Therapists and is also clinical fellow in the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. Jamie has completed level two training in Gottman Method couples therapy, as well as certification as an prepare-enrich facilitator. She also provides supervision to master's level interns and associate license professionals. Welcome to the show, Jamie. I'm so glad you could join us today.

Jamie: Thank you for having me.

Scott: Jamie, you're here today to talk about how electronic social media, technology are all impacting relationships. So what is it that you see? What problems do you see that couples are experiencing in their relationships when they can't seem to put down their smartphones, their laptops, their tablets, which is becoming very common today?

Jamie: Absolutely. We have a society where we have the means to be constantly connected, but when it comes to the people closest to us we're often really disconnected because these phones, the laptops, the tablets-- things like that--get in the way either from a business perspective or just things that we like to engage in for fun. So the thing that we see with couples usually occur as anger, arguments, distance, disconnection, feelings of rejection; things like that. Sometimes they're not even aware of it, but oftentimes it'll be a primary complaint when they come into therapy.

Scott: Well, what are some of the short or long term negative effects that these couples should worry about that this type of behavior can actually have on the relationship?

Jamie: Sure. I think it's another area where we kind of just become disconnected as a couple. Oftentimes, after the dating phase is over we have a hard time connecting with each other, trying to find ways to learn about each other still and do those things that couples first do when they start dating, and technology just really gives an outlet that creates even more issues there. So, in the short-term, more arguments is definitely what a lot of couples see. A lot of times they come in saying, "Things just aren't quite right anymore. We don't feel as in love as we used to. We don't feel as connected. We don't enjoy each other as

much." They spend less time learning about each other. In the long term, if it gets to the point where one or both partners just don't feel very connected, they don't feel like they're important, it can often lead to ending of relationships. It can also, with technology, because of social media, oftentimes we have couples come in and they've had online affairs. So, certainly, those are some of the short-term and the long term negative effects that can happen from technology.

Scott: Yeah. I would have to imagine, as easy as the online technology makes it to reconnect with old flames and people from their past, that has to be a very common problem nowadays.

Jamie: It really is. It's becoming more and more of an issue, and I would say 8 out of 10 couples that we see, if it's not the primary issue, it's at least an issue in the relationship, not necessarily a full-blown affair online but anything from, "Oh, you changed the status online," or, "Somebody saw this on Facebook," or, "Why were you complaining about me on Facebook? Why did you say this?"--anything like that--or, "You commented on this person's picture." Just little things, but they have a way of working themselves into a relationship and causing a really big problem.

Scott: Wow.

Jamie: Yeah.

Scott: Now, as a therapist, you're sitting down and you're speaking with couples and they've come to you to kind of explore and perhaps even resolve, obviously, some issues in the relationship, but at what point do you see couples becoming aware that technology might be one of the issues? Or are they coming in and saying, "He's always on the smartphone," or, "She's doing this on Facebook"? Does it come right away, or do you help them discover it?

Jamie: Sometimes it does. It kind of depends. I work with a lot of couples that deal with infidelity, and if that's a primary reason for them coming and that has been on technology or social media, then that obviously is presented pretty much right away. For other couples, it tends to start coming out in the first couple of sessions, and usually it comes out with one person bringing it up in a very criticizing or blaming way, such as, "Well, if you weren't on Facebook all the time maybe we would spend more time together," or, "Well, I asked you to do this, but you're always on that game, or you're always doing this on your phone," or, "I don't know what she does on her phone, but she's always on it." Those types of things tend to come up in that way, and that's usually when I slow them down and ask them about the role that they feel that technology does play in their relationship. And when I say "technology," it can really be anything from just having the laptop in your lap all the time to really looking into; is it more social media related or are there other communications and connections that are going on online that are interfering with the relationship, and those types of things? For couples that don't bring it up at all, I don't always mention it, but if it start to feel like there may be some sense that something's going on, I just maybe bring it up. You know, "How big of a role does technology play in your relationship?" and kind of see what they say. I would say under 10 percent don't have any issues with it at all and the rest do, even if it's on a smaller end.

Scott: Well, I can see how the "liking" of the pictures, or reconnecting with old flames, and those types of things, would cause problems, but I find it funny that you even said the words, "You're spending too much time on the game on your phone." I had a friend this week tell me that there is a game he plays on his phone and he has to turn the phone sideways to play the game, and his girlfriend is getting very upset with him because of the amount of time that he's playing on it. So he told me he's learned to play the game with the phone upright so she's not aware.

Jamie: Yeah, absolutely. And if it's not on the phone, there's games that are played online. I really think people just don't realize how much time they're spending time on it, but I absolutely have heard those complaints. "I can't get them to go to the store with me or take care of the kids, but he's playing Minecraft," or whatever it may be, "for hours." So it's just like anything else that takes away your attention and your focus from the relationship or from your family. It can become a real issue.

Scott: Sure. Well, have you noticed any patterns? You're saying 8 out of 10, so it sounds like it's affecting almost everybody you're talking to, but are there any patterns that kind of help identify what type of couples are struggling with this, struggling having a good connection because they're spending too much time on electronics, social media--that type of stuff?

Jamie: Absolutely. It really kind of crosses all socioeconomic statuses, ages, demographics. I will say that the more access that people have to the electronics, then the more at-risk they are spending more time on it. So someone that might have a laptop for work or school purposes versus someone that may have the iPad, the iPhone, the tablet, this, that, and the other, obviously, they're going to have more access to it. But I really haven't noticed any trends. I see couples of all ages, ranges, all different levels of their relationship and lengths of relationships, and I've seen it across the board.

Scott: So what do we do? Where do we start? You got a couple that comes in and they are dealing with this problem of technology, and what do you suggest they do to resolve the problem?

Jamie: Well, one of the things is we really talk about, again, how they feel like it's impacting them and just sort of bring awareness to it, first off, because I think in the sense of games, and maybe even Facebook--things like that--a lot of times people just don't realize. They may not even be aware of how much time they're spending on it. So, even sometimes for my individual clients, I'll talk to them about that. How much of your day do you feel like you're spending time on social media or on technology--things like that? And then I just have a conversation with the couple about what it's like for you as the partner when your spouse is on this all the time? What kind of things do you feel? What kind of thoughts are you having? Are you concerned that they may be doing something more? Those types of things just to initially bring light to it and then help them with the communication skills that can help them discuss those feelings. Typically, couples don't come out and say, "I'm feeling really hurt that you're putting this in front of me." Typically, it comes out in anger or they may just get up and walk away and then the other person doesn't know what's going on at all. So helping them sort of understand the implications behind it and then set expectations around it. I think everything in relationships, sometimes, we have to set expectations around, kind of putting barriers around it. Like, at dinnertime we're not going to have any type of technology, or at least for an hour a night we're going to sit down and just spend time with each other without any type of phones or anything like that. We're going to unplug for a little bit. The other thing I would recommend is I've seen some couples where they're unable to have a serious heart-to-heart conversation in person and so they tell me, "We just do it over text or email because it feels more comfortable." I would absolutely recommend couples don't do that because things can be taken very different in written format than they can verbally, especially not having any nonverbal cues to read off of. It can really make for a disaster of communication at times.

Scott: What about specific items? Can we drill down on that and name some specific things that you're having the couples work on that help them get over this technology barrier?

Jamie: Sure. The big thing is I really challenge couples to come up with a set amount of time, whether it's 15 minutes in the beginning, 20 minutes, an hour, whatever it can be where they have absolutely no technology. You just literally unplug and do something as a couple together. Maybe you take a walk, maybe you do watch a movie or do something together in that nature, maybe you listen to music, maybe just have a conversation, eat dinner--whatever it is--but to agree to put down the cell phones, put down the

tablets for a set amount of time. I also have couples do 10-minute check-ins every night in the beginning, where they just address what were the things that you felt were positive in our relationship today and what are things that you wish we could improve on--keep it to about three. I think that's important, too. If technology is one of those things, then that's something that they can mention at that time. Like, "Hey, I thought you were maybe on this a little bit too much today, so can we pull away from that a little bit tomorrow?"

Scott: You would probably saying that getting a new laptop is not spending time together.

Jamie: Right, exactly.

Scott: This is probably a big question, and I know it's been a topic among a lot of couples that I know, but what about sharing access to these gadgets and social media? I've seen a lot of fights over not having the password to the smartphone, not being able to see the friend list in Facebook, and so on. Do you think it's healthy to share that information, or do you think that's a deeper underlying problem in the relationship?

Jamie: That is a very good point, and I do have a lot of couples that come in with those issues, especially in hindsight if something's happened. For couples that there hasn't been an infidelity or any serious types of distrust or anything like that, they don't typically bring it up. But once any partner starts to feel like the other one is hiding something in terms of emails, or phone calls, or text messages--things like that--absolutely. It comes up. My general rule of thumb for couples is: you probably shouldn't be doing things that you wouldn't do in front of your partner. So if you wouldn't text this person or call this person in front of your partner, you probably shouldn't be doing it if they're not there. That's my general rule of thumb. As far as sharing the passwords, I think that transparency is probably best in relationships to a certain level. I certainly understand and respect people's individual rights to privacy as well, so I think couples have to kind of work that out. For some people, sharing a password may do more harm than good in their relationship if they really feel that sense of needing to be trusted and needing that sense of personal privacy for whatever reason. But, definitely, if I'm working with couples with affairs, that's one of the first things that has to happen. They have to have full transparency and disclosure, full access to anything electronic related, email accounts, and things like that. They understand it. They don't always love it in the beginning, but they definitely understand the reasoning behind it. I would say for couples that maybe have met in an online type of way, maybe through a dating service, or a chat line, or something like that, it can definitely come up later if one partner is still using any type of social media or online service in those ways because it becomes a, "You met me this way, so how do I know you're not going to meet somebody else this way?"

Scott: Yeah, that makes sense.

Jamie: Yeah.

Scott: With couples approaching the relationship with this transparency and positive communication, you've got them doing their 10-minute talks about how the day went, they're spending some more meaningful time together, what are the changes that you're seeing in the quality and the interaction of the relationship?

Jamie: Well, couples generally find that--I don't say this flippantly--they like each other again. They get that sort of "in love" feeling back. They enjoy spending time together. They feel like they're working together more as a team, that they have support from each other, they kind of have each other's back. The arguing definitely decreases--less arguments. More wanting to meet each other's needs and putting each other first, and just kind of a general overall feeling of connectedness.

Scott: Well, Jamie, we just had a big iPhone launch this past weekend, and as everyone's running out to get their new smartphones, is there anything else that you think our listeners should know before they pick up that new device?

Jamie: I will say I'm not anti-technology. I don't have the new iPhone, but I do have the iGadgets, and the laptops, and those types of things, so I always try to practice from a perspective of what I tell my clients I try to also adhere to. So if I feel like it's too hard for me to do out of my office, I'm not going to ask couples to do it. But I notice in my own relationship and my family that we need to unplug sometimes, too, so we try to make that a rule. I definitely see the outcomes of it, so I think you can enjoy, you just have to have boundaries around it like everything else in life.

Scott: Well, Jamie, thank you so much for talking with us today and being on the show.

Jamie: Absolutely. Thanks for having me.

Scott: To find out more about Jamie Criswell and her practice, Foundations Family Therapy, you can visit their website at [www.foundationsft.com](http://wwwFOUNDATIONSFT.COM), or call 919-285-4802 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and previous episodes, visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Scott Blair, until next time. Stay happily married.

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