

Marriages and relationships are not fixed. You have to work at it. The essential aspect is communication. We are wired for instant feedback. Forever, we have conversed in real-time with an immediate feedback loop. The feedback loop provides a stable foundation for communication. Everything is understood. If there is a question, it can be clarified at the moment. With digital communication, there is no instant feedback. Everything is delayed. The result is “broken loops” of communication which I call Dyscommunication.

We are never sure if our message is received, understood, or returned. Dyscommunication is the misunderstandings and confusion of a system without instant feedback. Even in marriages, learning to decipher your partner’s electronic communication style presents a whole new area rife with the potential to misunderstand or offend the other. Writing in shorthand and emojis can take out not just the romance but also the intentions behind everyday interactions, creating ample opportunities for disconnection to take root.

Another factor that electronic communications—particularly texting—introduces into long-term relationships is that partners often have different expectations for and styles of communicating electronically (just like they can have different expectations for and styles of just about anything in life—money, parenting, work, leisure). This can add another layer of things to be negotiated, when one partner expects the other to be reachable at all times and the other partner keeps their phone at the bottom of their bag and forgets to check it more than once or twice all day, for example. This means of communication can then become a potential for disconnection.

In addition, your electronic communications to each other introduce more ambiguity into your conversations and more opportunities for your different styles to manifest; electronic communications from other people are also likely interfering in your couple time. In a 2014 study of 143 married or cohabitating women, researchers found that 62 percent said technology interferes with their leisure time together.<sup>1</sup> In addition:

- 40 percent said their partner gets distracted by the TV during a conversation.
- 35 percent said their partner will pull out their phone if they receive a notification, even if the couple is in the middle of a conversation.
- 33 percent said their partner checks their phone during mealtimes that they spend together.
- 25 percent said their partner actively texts other people during the couple's face-to-face conversations.

Of course, it's a good idea to create rules around the ways you interact with technology both together and separately.

### **Tips for Relationships to Avoid Dyscommunication**

- **Establishing screen-free zones and times.** Whether it's a room in the house, the car, or a certain time of day, such as the dinner hour, there have to be designated areas and times for couples to unplug from their devices and talk face-to-face. Being tethered to a phone all day and making it the primary source of communication in any relationship is unhealthy. Teens should not sleep next to their phones. (Adults shouldn't either.) According to a 2019 study "The New Normal: Parents, Teens, Screens, and Sleep in the United States" done by consumer advocacy group Common

Sense, four out of five teenagers with mobile devices keep them in their rooms overnight—and nearly a third of those bring them into their beds while sleeping. The survey also found that sleeping with phones “undermine[s] cognitive functioning” and was the key source of conflict within homes, and that many parents feared the devices were causing their teens to become “addicted.” The survey showed that the teens used their phones “round-the-clock” and reported using them right before bedtime, immediately upon rising, and getting up in the middle of night to check their phone.<sup>ii</sup> However, the study also showed that the apple didn’t fall far from the tree, and most adults admitted to the same behavior. Research shows that when people (teens and adults alike) sleep next to their devices they don’t sleep as well and feel the need to constantly be checking them, further impacting their mental health and making them prone to anxiety.

- **Prioritize opportunities to connect face-to-face.** Meals are a perfect time for connecting face-to-face. When watching movies together, playing board games, or sitting together outside, also make it clear that the priority is face-to-face conversation and that phones should be kept away. Plan events such as hikes, bike rides, or other outings that encourage conversation and make it impossible to check one’s phone.
- **Ask yourself what is really upsetting you.** Get to the heart of the issue. Ask yourself pointed questions: *Are you upset/anxious because your boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse hasn’t replied?* Then unpack your feelings. If you can recognize catastrophic thinking, try to walk yourself down by asking questions such as: *Is this true? Am I 100 percent sure this is true? What actual proof do I have?* Call the person or talk face-to-face to verify. If this isn’t possible now, talk to a friend and express your

feelings and concerns, but let your friend know that you're not looking for someone to validate your catastrophic stories or worst-case scenarios. Then make a list of other reasons why someone is not getting back to you—i.e., they are busy at work or with their family, they simply forgot, or need time to themselves.

- **Set boundaries and enforce them.** If your teenager is navigating a romantic relationship via text, then boundaries are imperative. Teenagers will be more likely to follow the rules if they are consistently enforced. It can't be something done on the fly. Many families utilize "Technology Contracts" that children and parents sign and agree to various rules of engagement. *Psychology Today* offers one on their website: "The Best Technology-Screen Time Contract for Kids" includes language for establishing screen-time rules for school nights and weekends, with language such as: "Our family shuts down all our devices at \_\_\_\_\_ o'clock. The devices remain off until the next morning. Devices will not be turned back on until everyone has finished breakfast and is dressed and ready to leave." It also has parameters for weekends and holidays, vacations, black-out times (with options for meals together, family gatherings, friends visiting, playdates, sleepovers, walking or driving). It also offers a variety of "alternatives" to screen time, such as choosing from three weekly activities that don't include screens—such as exercise, sports, musical instruments, art, dance, reading. It even contains acceptable search criteria for the web and social media behavior. It ends with an agreed-upon consequence for when the contract is broken and asks that both the child and parents sign, date, and agree.<sup>iii</sup>
- **Practice what you preach.** Teens are more likely to follow your lead. If you want to make sure your kids learn how to engage more with face-to-face conversation in their

relationship, then you must be willing to lead by example. That means putting the phone away when you're with your spouse/partner and not sleeping with the phone either.

- **Don't argue over text or try to resolve conflict through texting.** Why introduce so much risk for misunderstanding when things are already tough? Not surprisingly, a 2013 study by researchers at Brigham Young University found that couples who do try to hash out big issues over text report lower relationship satisfaction.<sup>iv</sup>
- **Use texts to send loving messages.** That same study found that when partners sent each other sweet messages via text they had higher relationship satisfaction. While that may not be surprising, what was unexpected was that *sending* a nice text was associated with an even higher level of relationship satisfaction than receiving one was. Let that inspire you to use your texts to your main squeeze to express love and not just work out logistics or share updates.