

## **Is Your Cell Phone Getting in the Way of Your Relationship?**

By Sheila Rubin, LMFT, RDT/BCT

I had a client a few years ago who called me very upset because his wife had thrown his cell phone out the window.

You might be surprised, but attachment injuries can be caused by an electronic device!

Nowadays, many kids as well as adults are texting or even talking on their cell phones during dinner, if they even eat dinner together. Often spouses are texting or talking on their phones while they're trying to have a conversation with each other. There is something almost unnoticed that can happen when one person turns away from their partner or child—and toward the electronic device.

Sue Johnson says that we are wired to connect with each other. The building of a secure base happens when there's a lot of eye contact and talking about things and checking in and being there for each other. Our nervous system is affected when we feel connected to the people in our lives. Our nervous system is also affected if we think we don't matter to the people we're close to. Bowlby wrote: "We determine who we are through the eyes of those we love."

Yes, technology is very helpful in finding a movie, a restaurant, a babysitter—but that same technology can get in the way of an intimate moment or trying to get one's point across.

With the couple that came in about the flying cell phone, I gently helped them unpack their emotions. The wife spoke of her frustration with her husband who, when he got home after being at work all day, instead of talking to her first thing, he was still talking to his electronic device. I asked her how she felt, and she said she felt like she didn't matter and didn't mean anything to him. When she saw him look away from her, she felt invisible. Even though he tried to correct her by saying, "I'm talking to work—I'm trying to arrange things so we can go on our vacation," she felt dismissed and completely in the shadows. Then, when they got to their vacation, she saw his cell phone and exploded—by throwing it out the window.

I asked her to tell me more. She said, "I don't know. I finally had some time with him. We were away by ourselves, we were in the woods, and I just really wanted to be together." I asked if her throwing his cell phone out the window was a way to feel more assured that she was going to

keep his attention during the trip, and she said yes. She said, “I hate to feel this way. Sometimes I think he loves his cell phone more than me.” I asked her how lonely it must be to feel like her husband was choosing technology over her. She said it was breaking her heart and she had kept her feelings inside until the moment she couldn’t take it anymore.

Her husband was surprised to hear that she had all these feelings, and he apologized for causing her pain. I asked him if he realized how much she was hurting, and he said he had no idea.

I had them look at each other then and acknowledge the hurt in her eyes. I also wondered if, when she was feeling like she didn’t matter, there was some embarrassment or shame around that. She said that she felt so much shame to be having these intense feelings about how much she hated his phone.

It turns out that he had some feelings of shame as well, that when he would come home and she didn’t greet him, he would feel bad, like he had failed. And so he was not feeling good about himself either. And it almost didn’t matter if he turned to his cell phone first, so that he could avoid seeing the sad look in her eyes, or if she turned away in order not to feel the rupture. Both of them were disconnected and hurt and not able to talk about any of it, until the flying cell phone incident brought them into therapy.

As we were together, we developed a new appreciation for his cell phone as a way for him to stay connected with work yet without it getting in the way of their relationship. Sometimes he would leave it in the car or put it in his desk, and then he’d say to her, “You know, I’m choosing you. My cell phone is in the car.” And they’d laugh together.

So what about other situations, such as two people watching TV together while one is on their device?

This happens a lot. It used to be that watching TV together was like “parallel play,” where people are not making eye contact but they’re watching the same thing and laughing and making their own comments about the show. So they’re together in a casual, free-flowing way. But now a change is that even though they’re sitting together, one or both are on devices and their attention is turned away from the shared activity. And so the bonding may be less than it could be.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it's important to be aware of what's going on and to have communication about it. Maybe to say, "I am going to watch the show with you, but I also need to be texting my friend or working or organizing my photos." It used to be that people were working in separate places in the house, but now they can be working while sitting together, due to our wonderful devices.

All of this can be negotiated and talked about. Maybe you decide not to have any technology at the dinner table. Or you have a cell phone-free zone in the house. Each family is going to be different.

The vital thing is to understand the attachment issue, because if the attention is going to be broken, we need to be aware of how that affects someone and be able to talk about the feelings that come up.

Gershen Kaufman says that shame is the rupture of the interpersonal bridge. Ruptures can be subtle misattunements with attention. So, for example, if you shift eye contact from the other person to your technology, the other person may feel like there's been a disconnection and feel shame.

So, the flying cell phone incident was a couple years ago. Now many couples and families I work with have some attachment injury as a result of technology. It's not the tech itself, it's the moment of turning away from relationship that can have one partner feel that they've been cut off; it may feel painful or shaming. In the dynamic with my husband, sometimes he hates it when I'm on my cell phone, so I ask him about it first, so he feels included, or I just make calls in my home office so he doesn't feel excluded. When we were on our recent trip in the mountains, I put it away and I didn't watch TV or do any cell phone work for about 10 days—and we're so much closer now!

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