

# Too much tech use can cut into couple time, study shows

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Sneaking peeks at your phone or doodling on your tablet, even just a little bit, may hurt your couple time, according to a new collaborative study involving the University of Alberta.

Although technology use is common during shared time, on days when people and their romantic partners used it more, feelings about [leisure time](#) and daily [relationship](#) quality suffered, according to research published in Media Psychology.

"The findings suggest that relationship deterioration—or growth—may occur from seemingly small, insignificant choices about when or when not to pick up a device around a [romantic partner](#)," said study co-author Adam Galovan, a professor of family science in the Faculty of Agricultural, Life & Environmental Sciences.

A daily 10-day survey asking 145 couples about their technology use during leisure time together revealed that "even just a bit of distraction can decrease relationship satisfaction, increase conflict and can build up over days or weeks," he said.

"We often think it's OK to be on your smartphone if it's just for a few minutes, but if that's a consistent habit in the relationship, that could be a negative over time."

The study indicated that individuals engaged in at least some solo tech use during shared couple time on 67 percent of days, and shared use—such as watching TV together—on 69 percent of days.

Those who tended to be heavier technology users or believed their partners to be heavier users were less satisfied with their couple time and felt worse about their relationship overall.

"It could be that if I'm spending time on my phone or watching a movie, I'm not as engaged with my partner, I'm not as tuned in to what's going on, so it's time we're spending together, but I'm not getting much out of it—and chances are, my partner isn't either," said study lead Brandon T. McDaniel, a family research scientist at the Parkview Mirro Center for

Research and Innovation.

Their findings also suggest couples could experience more conflict if partners spend too much time on devices.

Besides being mindful of individual tech use, it's also important to be aware of shared use during couple time; the study revealed that shared use may not always be meaningful enough to benefit a relationship, McDaniel added.

"For it to have a [positive effect](#), couples may need to be more proactive in deciding when to engage in shared technology use and how best to build up their relationship through that shared use."

Technology is part of modern life, but couples need to strike a balance so they're not feeling disconnected from each other because of their digital habits, Galovan advised.

"We need to make sure we are letting our partners know we value them and our relationship. Part of that is making sure we're not sending the wrong message in how we use technology."

Here's how to balance technology use during couple time:

## **Be intentional about tech use during together time**

"This means having specific reasons for using technology, a plan for when you use technology and designated no-tech times. At dinnertime or before bedtime, put your devices away," said Galovan.

## **Pay attention to your partner**

"Look up from your device and smile if they walk into the room. Those [little things](#) show you value your partner and the relationship," said Galovan. Eye contact is important, McDaniel added. "Giving someone eye contact says a lot about what you value in the moment."

## Communicate about tech use as a couple

"Again, simply sitting down together in front of the TV is likely not enough to build your relationship," noted McDaniel. "Talk with one another about what you want to do, share in leisure or media use that you both enjoy, and politely talk to one another about what you would like your shared time together to look like and how tech should or should not be used during that time."

## Realize when it's an issue

Therapists and relationship educators should also consider whether troublesome technology use is an issue for their clients. "They can help couples to work on problematic use and to be more deliberate in when and why they turn on a device. We can all think of times where we mindlessly scroll through [social media](#) or news stories on our phone," Galovan noted.

**More information:** Brandon T. McDaniel et al. Daily technofence, technology use during couple leisure time, and relationship quality, *Media Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/15213269.2020.1783561](https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2020.1783561)

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