

Technology Boundaries in Relationships

I help my corporate clients understand how emerging technologies impact their current and future business viability. In my conversations with them around technologies in the workplace, the topic of how technology impacts their personal lives is becoming increasingly common.

Technology can help couples go stronger in many ways, but it can also be the cause of tension and friction if boundaries and expectations aren't agreed upon. Here are some guidelines to help you and your partner get on the same page around the use of technology in order to help the bond between you become even stronger.

The key message is that you need to talk these topics through. There is no one-size-fits all, and each of you will come to the partnership with different expectations and needs when it comes to how use technology together and as a couple. *Don't make the assumption that they're on the same page in this area just because you're aligned in so many others...talk all of this through!*

1. Mealtime Boundaries

- Check your phones and take care of messages before you sit down to eat.
- Ban all devices from the table.
- Keep your phones in another room. If you're a restaurant, keep them in the car if you drove, or in your purse / pocket if not.
- Turn off all sound and vibration notifications for duration of the meal.
- Agree on "penalties" for breaking the boundary. It needs to be steep enough to be a significant deterrent, and also followed up on and honored in a specific time period. For example, the penalty for going to the other room to look at your phone when you remembered during a meal that you have to check for an urgent email could be doing all dishes for the entire next week.

2. Bedtime Boundaries

- Devices interfere with sleep habits and make it more difficult to settle down, so keeping them out of the bedroom is good for everyone.
- Agree on an amount of time to both be on your devices at the same time, and then agree to stop at the same time. For example, agree that the first 15 minutes of bedtime is device time.
- After that, one of you take both devices and put them in another room.
- If one or both of them is used as a wake-up alarm, then either get a separate clock that is only an alarm, or go to the other room in the morning to turn it off.

3. Device Access

- Have an open conversation around access to each other's phones. Exchange views and feelings around this, and the underlying reasons behind them. For example, don't be afraid to share that you do want access to your partner's phone because in a previous relationship trust was broken due what you discovered on the other person's device. The conversation will turn into one about trust, which is the core topic that needs to be explored, instead of the other person may perceive as you being controlling. Being open and honest will build better bridges than being indirect and using things like humor and passive aggressive behavior to see what your partner is doing on their phone.
- Once you've both fully and openly shared your views, agree on clear expectations on how to move forward. You'd be surprised to see how often each person interprets the notion of "access" differently! Access can be broken down into three main categories, and you should agree on how to handle each one of them.
 - **"Just there":** The other person's phone is "just sitting there" on the coffee table and you happen to walk by it on the way to the kitchen. Is it ok for you to pick it up and turn on the screen out of sheer curiosity? And vice versa?
 - **Notification Alerts:** You're both in car, the other person is driving, and their phone is in the middle console. A notification sound and banner pop up, and you see that a text message came in. Is it ok for you to pick up the phone to see who the text is from? Or would the other person consider that too much?
 - **Passwords:** If you agree you will share passwords, does that mean that you can look at each other's devices at any time, and go into any and all apps as much as you want, even when the other person is not in the same room?
- Keep in mind that one of you may be more comfortable giving access than the other. Your partner may be ok giving you full access, for example, but you may be comfortable giving "notification alert" access. Decide on whether or not your access levels will be same for both of you, or if different access is ok, and why.

4. Social Media

- Even with no initial bad intentions, social media can present us with tempting situations that can lead us down a slow path to infidelity. Discuss with your partner how each of you defines "crossing the line" on social media, in posts and direct messages. If there are gaps in your definitions, discuss if either of you will modify your behavior accordingly, or not – and why.
- Discuss with your partner how much you'd each like to be presented and viewed as a couple on social media. If you want to share lots of selfies with the two of you and the other person doesn't, discuss the reasons for your desired behaviors. Explore what presenting a "united front" means to each of you, and if you have differing opinions, what would a satisfactory compromise be for each of you?