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## Is Your TV Ruining Your Marriage?

*This is Episode number 77 of Stay Happily Married, "Is Your TV Ruining Your Marriage?"*

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

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm so glad you could join us. I have on the telephone with me today Dr. Colleen Hamilton. She is a psychologist who works with Lepage Associates in Durham. She has a doctoral degree in clinical psychology and she has worked with across the board all sorts of age ranges, everybody from little kids to adults to folks in their 80s; and she works with families to address conflict resolution, non-compliance, and communication.

Welcome back to the show, Colleen.

Colleen Hamilton: Hey. It's great to be back.

Lee Rosen: Well, I am thrilled to have you. And this whole "Is Your TV Ruining Your Marriage" topic, I really want us to jump right into that. You know, in most households -- at least that I visit -- and I know at mine, there are multiple TVs. We've got computers, cell phones, I mean, you name it. We're surrounded by all these electronics.

And yet a lot of us I think have this -- maybe this left over idea from Leave It To Beaver or that whole '50s idea that everybody should sort of sit down for dinner and have that family that loves spending time together and talking about things and all of that. But today it seems like the TV is on and the food is take-out and the teenager is eating when he wants to and other people are eating -- you know,

it's just not quite what it was at one time. And I think that sort of conflicts with our maybe traditional image for some of it.

Where I wanted to start with that is, is this shift away from this traditional idea of families to what's really going on out there now -- is that having a negative impact on marriage and on families? What's happening with all of that?

Colleen Hamilton: Well, it depends on the degree of the shift. If you're shifting away from kind of traditional sense of family across the board, that can definitely have a negative impact on family dynamics. But keeping in mind that a lot of families today are non-traditional as well, so you may have parents living in different places, commuting back and forth to work. So all of that has to be taken into account when you're talking about this shift also.

And the piece that you don't want to take from, and that technology and everyone being spread all over can take away from, is that feeling of connectedness and the decreased level of involvement that family members have in each other's day to day life.

Lee Rosen: So that's a bad thing if that's happening, right?

Colleen Hamilton: If it's happening across the board --

Lee Rosen: Yeah.

Colleen Hamilton: -- then that can definitely have a negative impact.

Lee Rosen: Well, isn't it almost inevitable when -- I mean, I've got two teenagers and on the rare occasion when my wife and I and our kids sit down, somebody -- even on the most perfect of evenings -- and we don't have a TV within eyeshot of where we have dinner, but somebody will get a cell phone call. I mean, it just seems inevitable that that technology becomes like another participant in your family and makes it tough to have anything that resembles anything like that traditional image.

Colleen Hamilton: Yeah. That's very true. There's always either the cell phone or the house phone or an e-mail alert popping up on a computer somewhere around. But at this point, with technology being as integrated into our daily lives as it is, it's an active effort to set aside that time to keep it out, whether it be at a meal time or another time during the evening.

Sometimes the schedules as they are now, as you said with teenagers, there are kids running -- everyone's on a different

schedule. So dinnertime may not be the family time anymore, but it's very important to make sure that there is some family time at some point throughout the day set aside specifically for family time.

Lee Rosen: Family time. Well, I wonder, families have had trouble forever. I mean, this is not a new idea that it is challenging to function as a family and have everything working for everybody. And what I wonder is, is the technology the problem today or is that just convenient that that's what we blame it on? I mean, there have been a lot of families that didn't -- things didn't work out in a lot of families for a long time and a lot of marriages haven't worked. I mean, do we just blame it on the cell phone but it's really that we want to be distracted?

Colleen Hamilton: People have always found reasons to neglect or push aside family time if it wasn't of high priority to them. Technology, like you said, is making it easier and more convenient for them to do that. Whereas in the past you may have to say, "Oh, by the way, I'm not coming home for dinner tonight. I have to work late. A meeting came up."

Now, with the phone calls and everything else that can just come in and hack in during family time, if you're not making that active concerted effort to put that aside during family time it's very convenient to allow that to interrupt family time regularly.

Lee Rosen: Right. You don't have to stay at the office late because you've got the office in your pocket. Yeah.

Colleen Hamilton: Exactly. So it's much more convenient for it to interrupt family time if we don't take that active effort to not allow it to do so.

Lee Rosen: Right. Do you get people coming in where the primary complaint is my spouse is just so checked out with the phone and the computer and the TV and all of that? Is that a common theme?

Colleen Hamilton: To a degree, yes. I have had people come in saying, "My spouse is just bringing all their work home with them." Whatever mood that may be, it's like the work time doesn't shut off, then there's no differentiation between work and family time.

Lee Rosen: Do you see that more now? Like, does the whole economic situation make people maybe worry more about their jobs and want to do more work and bring more home?

Colleen Hamilton: I think that is definitely having an impact. And you're also seeing people picking up second jobs or staying later to get the raise or

other things that are cutting into family time. Or picking up a little something to do on the weekend to help with the finances.

Lee Rosen: Right. Is there today -- how do you know if you're normal? I mean, I wonder that myself a lot. But what is normal for your level of being distracted by all of this stuff? Is there any sort of barometer for that?

Colleen Hamilton: Well, hopefully -- and the goal for "normal" family interactions is that you have a family conversation every day. If you're getting pulled in so many directions -- and that's another common distraction that's coming in. There's the expectation of parents being kind of Supermom, Superdad. I need to have the full time job, get the kids involved in all the activities, keep up my own social life, have everything done with the house, be a good neighbor. We have all these roles that we're trying to fill. We're getting pulled in a lot of directions.

And if we're getting pulled to the extent that -- even driving in the car with your child. Okay, I'm not sitting here and talking to my child. They have their iPod on. I'm thinking about the eight billion things I need to do today. That's what's really getting in the way because we're not taking that opportunity to have conversations.

Lee Rosen: Right. Although I have to say that there are times when my teenagers will have their iPods on and that really is the preferred -- don't talk to me any more, kid. Although, I hear you. You sacrifice the relationship when you make that trade. It's like using the -- instead of the TV that's the babysitter, the iPod is the babysitter, I guess and you don't have to deal with them. So I can see the downside of that.

So how do you know when you're really getting into trouble? What are the red flags?

Colleen Hamilton: Some of the things that you want to look for is do you still know who your child's friends are? Do you know what activities they're involved in? Short of saying, "Hey, take me to George's house," and you'll take them, but do you know who George is? Do you know what other children are going to be there? Or even for married couples without children, do you know how your spouse's day went? If you're not knowing those kind of basic things then you're really losing that bond and that attachment with your family members.

Lee Rosen: Got you. Yeah. You can sort of quiz yourself and if you feel like you haven't heard that stuff in a while you'll kind of know your -- you know, and it isn't always I guess that we haven't heard it, but it may

also be that we're not listening. We may even be having those conversations but we're just not paying attention; we're too distracted by everything else that is grabbing our attention.

Colleen Hamilton: Exactly. And another piece too is, "Do I feel like my family members have heard me?" It's a lot easier to use ourselves as a barometer at times, saying, "Have I shared how my day is, what's going on at work? Do I feel like I'm being listened to and supported?" And if not, then there's probably that disconnect there.

Lee Rosen: Right. When you look at relationships without kids, does this -- is it different? I mean, can you take more time and play computer games and all that and really not create a problem?

Colleen Hamilton: Well, you do have more time in general throughout your day because you're not doing the care-giving piece. So you do have more times for the computer games, the TV, the other activities. But you still need to find time to spend with your spouse. Communication and connectedness are what those interactions are all about and they're essential for any relationship to be successful.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, it makes sense. I walk into houses visiting friends or whatever and the TV will be on. Just sort of 24/7 TV is on. Is that -- for me, anyway, if I walk in a room and a TV is on -- and I actually go to a restaurant a lot where they have TVs around the periphery of the restaurant and my eyes are drawn to that. I find myself focusing on it. They don't even have the volume on but I'm trying to figure out what's going on on the TV. Does stuff like that interfere with the connection between the husband and the wife, where there's this sort of low level of electronics going on around you?

Colleen Hamilton: Well, it can. Again, it depends on how you use it. If you're sitting together and you're watching a show and then you're following it up with conversation about what happened and what did you think of this character doing this and you're talking about it, you're still sharing your own thoughts, your feelings, and still works on that connectedness bond knowing your spouse.

If you're blankly watching a TV show and it's over and, okay, let's flip to the next one, that can be more problematic also. So having the TV in and of itself may not be problematic, but if you're using it to substitute for conversation --

Lee Rosen: Right.

Colleen Hamilton: -- that's where it's more problematic.

Lee Rosen: Sort of like that -- you used to see those commercials -- the commercials -- about watching TV with your kids and then discussing the show. And so basically I guess if you're married there ought to be commercials telling us, "Watch the TV with your spouse if you're going to try and stay married." And talk about it. Interact about it. Don't just let it fill up the time but stay engaged with each other about whatever it is you decided to watch.

Colleen Hamilton: Exactly. You're not going into your two separate rooms watching your two separate shows and that's it. There's still -- part of the show is contributing and prompting conversation and connection with your spouse.

Lee Rosen: My wife and I watched a movie a couple of days ago and she -- the discussion was her explaining to me why that had been a really poor choice for me to have her watch that movie. It apparently wasn't all that helpful to her.

Colleen Hamilton: But you learned something about what she likes to watch and doesn't like to watch --

Lee Rosen: Yes.

Colleen Hamilton: -- so it was helpful in the relationship.

Lee Rosen: That's true. I figured out she doesn't like good movies. Yeah. Yes, I learned a great deal. I won't try that again.

So you know you have this -- the reality of people being in bed in the morning or at night checking their e-mail now today, and I know some people have -- a lot of people have TVs in the bedroom. I guess that's more the rule than the exception. Do you think that -- I will tell you, we had this feng shui expert on the show months ago and she really had issues with what goes on in your bedroom; bedroom should be reserved for quiet and that sort of thing.

Do you think there are issues with having the Blackberry on the nightstand and the TV going at you while you're in the bedroom, or should that be reserved for another room in the house?

Colleen Hamilton: Again, it's very individual. It can have a big impact. Not only does it impact the relationship, having it in there, but it can also impact your sleep. Having anything with light, all of that on in the room -- if you're someone who has trouble sleeping, just the blinking light that someone is charging next to the bed can cause problems.

But in addition to that, it depends on how you unwind, how you do relax. Some people use the TV to relax before going to bed. Again, if you're using it to avoid engaging with your spouse, that becomes a big problem. And it's also how often do you do this? Is it, okay, work's really tough right now; I really need to check and see if this e-mail came in? Versus, I'm checking my e-mail every single night as we're going to bed. So it's looking at patterns and how that's impacting our family.

Lee Rosen: Right. It really does sound like the key is the technology can't play a role that I guess replaces your emotional connection to your spouse or to your family; that once it starts doing that, then you're in big trouble.

Colleen Hamilton: Exactly. We need to remember that it's entertainment. Though it's functional with e-mail and cell phones, it's still the entertainment realm and can't replace family.

Lee Rosen: Right. Theoretically. Although, it keeps getting better. But let me ask you, what do you do? So someone walks in and the whole family is saying, "Look, this member of the family --" mom or dad or whoever "-- is just checked out. All they do is watch and TV and Internet chat and whatever else it may be." What do you advice? How do you -- as a professional, they've come to you for help. What do you do with that family?

Colleen Hamilton: Well, I do a couple of things with them. First, we set up the schedule so we're not saying, "Okay, you can't use the computer any time ever." But we set a schedule where they can do that for a half hour or an hour a day.

But the other piece is scheduling family activities that aren't in the home. So take one cell phone -- an emergency cell phone -- with you for the family but scheduling short day trips to the beach, to the park, to the zoo, to somewhere so it's not right there in your face that you're feeling torn between time with family and time with technology. And getting more engaged in your child's, spouse's, extended family's lives. That's where the easier part comes in.

Once we start disengaging it's easy to stay disengaged. So re-engaging all the family members, re-establishing bonds and connectivity within that family unit, we'll see the natural progression with the schedule and reconnecting that bond as the family moves forward will be able to keep that pattern because now I'm a part of this. And you're feeling more connected and getting more support there. You're feeling better about yourself and about the family as a unit.



Lee Rosen: So you start a little cycle of basically -- you take the first step but the next thing you know you're getting positive reinforcement for it because the things you're doing are making you feel good.

Colleen Hamilton: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Makes sense. That's why you're the professional. What else do we have to know about this if we really want to keep our TVs and our computers and everything else from ruining our marriages? Any other tips?

Colleen Hamilton: Well, just knowing relationships are hard work. We've learned a lot from the technology age, like the proverb "garbage in, garbage out" with computers apply a lot to your relationships. If you don't put quality and effort into your relationship, you're not going to get quality out of them.

Lee Rosen: Hard to argue with that. Yeah. It really does make sense. I will tell you quickly -- quick story, yesterday went down to the beach with my wife. And she loves the beach and we had not done anything like that in months and months where it was just the two of us. We shipped the kids off to school yesterday morning, jumped in the car, drove down to Wrightsville Beach -- two hours down the road -- and were hanging out down there from probably 10:30 in the morning, got home last night around 6:00.

Really very trivial investment of time but, wow, what a difference it made to her and therefore to the relationship. And it really is -- and it would have been so easy yesterday morning to get up and go to the office and do things that needed to be done, but here we are today no worse for the wear and the things that needed to be done yesterday are still here and they'll get done. But gosh, eight or nine hours and a little bit of money for gas and lunch, kaboom, really --

I mean, you describe the little bit of investment that people make by turning off the TV or putting away the Blackberry and going out and doing a family activity. We did it and I just -- I hadn't seen her that happy in quite some time. She really had a great time and we had a great time, talked the whole way down, whole way back. And I can give you a personal testimonial that your advice works.

You take a few minutes and invest it in the relationship and it really does make a huge, huge difference.

Colleen Hamilton: It just makes you feel more comfortable being around your other half just being. You don't have to talk but we can be in the same



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space and we don't need the cell phone, the computer, the other distraction; we're comfortable just being --

Lee Rosen: Right.

Colleen Hamilton: -- in the same space together. It works wonders for a relationship.

Lee Rosen: But I do love my little Blackberry.

Well, thank you, Colleen. I appreciate you being with us today. Really appreciate it.

Colleen Hamilton: Talk to you again soon.

Lee Rosen: All right. You can find out more about Colleen's counseling and therapy services at the Lepage Associates website. Let me tell you about that. It's at [LepageAssociates.com](http://LepageAssociates.com). You can also call Colleen's office at (919) 572-0000.

Thank you so much for listening today. I am so pleased with all the comments and feedback that we're getting. If you have input, we'd love to hear your ideas about how we're doing, what we could do better, upcoming guests you'd like to suggest, you name it. We love to hear from you.

A couple of ways you can give us feedback. You can post comments right at [StayHappilyMarried.com](http://StayHappilyMarried.com), you can e-mail us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com), you can also call our comment line at (919) 256-3083. We very much appreciate all the feedback we get and would love for you to keep it coming.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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