

Mobile Technologies and Relationships: Rebuilding Meaningful Connections

Melissa Penner

Master of Counselling, City University of Seattle
Vancouver BC, Canada

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Christine Dennstedt, Ph D, MA, RCC, Thesis Supervisor, Counsellor Education, Associate
Faculty

Jacqueline M. Mann, MA, RCC, Associate Director, Internship Coordinator
Second Reader

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Chapter 1: Mobile-Information Communication Technologies and Romantic Relationships

Mobile-information communication technologies (MICT) (smart phones, tablets, internet, social media, texting) have become the preferred method of communication for many people in the twenty first century (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2019; Turkle, 2015). The advent of the smartphone has enabled people to be “connected” to one another through various communication platforms from nearly any location, at any time. Thus, Computer-Mediated Communication’s (CMC) (Facebook, text message, Snap Chat, WhatsApp, online dating applications) have transformed the way that human beings socialize and communicate with one another. As the use of CMC is increasing, MICT appears to be meeting the human need for connection in a much more efficient manner than face to face communications. As such, CMC is being utilized as a mechanism for maintenance of romantic partnerships, thus creating both possibilities and challenges for the development of intimacy in relationship (Juhasz & Bradford, 2016). Although research has found that the use of MICT can strengthen ones perceived sense of connection in relationships (Janssen, Ijsselsteijn & Weserink, 2014; Hoffner & Lee, 2015), many studies indicate that MICT use functions as a distraction from face to face relationships thereby preventing the development of intimacy necessary for romantic relationship satisfaction (Amichai-Hamburger & Etgar, 2016; Roberts & David, 2016). This capstone aims to explore the effect of MICT, focusing on the role of CMC in the formation of intimacy in romantic relationships. Specifically, I will be looking at how mobile CMC impacts our ability to be present, empathic and attuned in long-term romantic partnerships. I hypothesize that a review of the literature will find that although more couples are utilizing MICT as a way to

connect with their intimate partners, the use of these technologies are actually undermining the ability for partners to be present with one another thereby impeding relationship satisfaction. Within this paper, the terms spouse and partner will be used interchangeably. The research presented in this paper considered and is inclusive of couples of all genders and sexual orientations.

The first chapter will provide context for the argument that MICT, especially CMC, are detracting from the intimacy of presence necessary to form close and satisfying romantic relationships. The impact of early attachment relationships on the development of ones' sense of self, their world view and capacity for intimacy will be explored. To follow, the fundamental roles of presence, empathy and responsiveness in the formation of satisfying relationships will be discussed with ideas from Gottman's Theory (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). As MICT has proliferated Western Society, CMC have provided new opportunities and challenges for romantic relationships. As such the landscape of MICT for relationship maintenance will be reviewed. Furthermore, the impacts that MICT has on the brain and its socio-emotional capacities are considered. Lastly, the third chapter will consolidate the knowledge of MICT impact on intimacy and relationship satisfaction by providing a practical approach that Counsellors can use with their clients. This final chapter will offer a series of strategies designed to help clients identify and mitigate the impact of technology related conflict in their relationships whilst simultaneously rebuilding their connection to one another.

Attachment and Romantic Relationships

The early attachment process between infants and their primary care-givers lays the foundation for the formation of adult romantic relationships (Collins & Reade, 1990). During infancy, children turn toward their primary care-givers for survival (food, warmth, safety and

security) as well as to be soothed when experiencing emotional distress (Seifer & Schiller, 1995; Bowlby, 1982 as cited in Collins & Read, 1990). As infants have not yet developed the skills for self-soothing, they rely on their care-givers to calm them. By providing attentive and emotionally sensitive responses to their child's expressions of need, care-givers are facilitating the development of their child's emotional regulation system (Siegel, 1999) and care-givers are modeling how to self soothe via their responses to their child. Moreover, care-givers who are consistently attentive to their child's needs and respond with warmth and emotional sensitivity are fostering the development of secure attachment (Siegel, 1999). Although this type of care giving may be considered the ideal, it is not always possible depending upon the interplay of psychological and socio-cultural factors that are impacting both infant and caregiver (Seifer & Schiller, 1995). For example, a mother living in a low-income neighbourhood may struggle to afford the basics of food and shelter necessary to provide a comfortable home environment. Therefore, in addition to caring for her new-born infant, this mother may be physically preoccupied with work and mentally consumed with financial worries thus would not be available or have the capacity to provide emotionally sensitive responses to her child's cries all the time. Furthermore, due to the stressors impeding their lives, the baby may be more difficult than the average to soothe. With inconsistencies in the mother's ability to be attentive and sensitive to her child's needs, in conjunction with the challenging temperament of the child, this infant may develop an insecure attachment. The attachment that the infant develops as a result of this early experience with their caregiver is considered to be stable, thus the child will carry this attachment style forward into their adult romantic relationships (Collins & Read, 1990). Bowlby's theory of attachment (1973) has posited that these early attachment experiences form

internal working models of self and other and that these models are persistent through to our adult romantic relationships (as cited in Collins & Read, 1990).

Internal Working Models

The internal working models of self and other developed during early attachment experiences can influence the satisfaction of adult romantic relationships. According to attachment theorists, a consequence of the care received in infancy is that children develop expectations for their worth and how they will be treated by others (Ainsworth 1978, as cited in Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Bowlby defined this process as the internal working model of self and other (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The expectations that one has for themselves and for their relationships tend to be stable and influences the formation of romantic relationships in adulthood (Collins & Read, 1990). Thus, an individual who grew up with a care-giver who was inconsistent in the care they provided (alternating between supportive, blaming, and absent emotionally) may carry an internal working model of self that informs them that they are not worthy of care and others cannot be relied upon to meet their needs. As a result of this internal working model of self (worthless) and other (unreliable) which was formed in infancy and is carried on through adulthood, this individual may struggle to achieve intimacy and satisfaction in romantic relationships as an adult. Alternatively, an individual who experienced a secure attachment (consistent, attentive, warm, supportive) may hold a more positive view of self and other thereby willingly seeking out romantic relationships without holding back parts of self for fear of failure or being hurt. In this way, the internal working models developed during infant attachment impacts ones' view of the self which ultimately guide individuals to seek partnerships with others later in life and will indirectly influence the satisfaction of these relationships.

Furthermore, attachment history also contributes to the development of intimacy in romantic relationships.

Attachment Style and Intimacy

According to Bowlby (1973), the quality and closeness of adult romantic partnerships is influenced by ones' attachment history (as cited in Collins & Read, 1990). The skills which are necessary for an individual to develop the capacity for intimacy are learnt throughout development, beginning with secure attachment to care-givers (Collins & Stroufe, n.d). Infants who have a secure attachment experience with their care-giver are being provided with warmth, attentiveness and emotionally sensitive responses (Seigel, 1999). As such, these care-givers are modelling the capacities necessary for intimacy development in adulthood. Researchers have noted that responsiveness and empathy create a foundation of trust that allows for authenticity in relating thus creating an intimate bond (Collins & Stroufe, n.d). For example, children who have been provided these foundational skills via their secure attachment relationships are more likely to view themselves as worthy of love, seek out relationships with others, and have the skills to facilitate meaningful romantic partnerships in adulthood. Conversely, people who were not afforded these skills (insecure attachment) have been found to experience more negative relationship experiences and struggle with empathy and intimacy (Collins & Read, 1990). Stanton, Pink & Campbell (2017) note that where more securely attached individuals experience admiration and empathy for their partners successes, those who have higher levels of avoidance attachment feel "antagonistic envy". Also, rather than communicating their internal experiences with others when distressed (as would facilitate intimacy) avoidant attached individuals are more likely to repress their experiences (Wei, Vogel, Ku & Zakalik, 2005 as cited in Stanton, Pink & Campbell, 2017). Although early attachment experiences appear to have a determining impact on

the capacity for intimacy in adult romantic relationships, the presence of consistent, positive, intimacy building experiences by ones' partner can improve the relational experience of the other over time (Stanton, Pink & Campbell, 2017; Kane, Jaremka, Guichard, Ford, Collins & Feeney, 2007). Therefore, the skills of secure attachment (attentiveness, emotional sensitivity and responsiveness) can be considered as fundamental for the growth of and satisfaction of all relationships, regardless of attachment style.

Presence, Empathy and Partner Responsiveness

Presence and empathy are the building blocks of supportive, satisfying, stable relationships. A couple's ability to share their thoughts and feelings, as well as constructively express themselves during conflict can increase the closeness they feel within intimate relationships. However, the development of closeness in relationship is a dyadic process which requires more than solely the expression of partner's thoughts and feelings. The ability for partner's to be present and empathetic to one another during expression of self in conversation is paramount for the development of intimacy in relationship. Presence is a term commonly used within the therapeutic relationship and refers to the therapist's ability to be in the moment with their client on emotional, cognitive and physical level (Geller & Porges, 2014). For the purpose of this paper, presence is defined as undivided, focused attention on romantic partners' expressions of self (for example, ones' needs, desires, fears or aspirations) during interpersonal communication. As romantic partners move beyond the first two years of their relationship (also known as the honeymoon phase), which is often characterized as a time of intense love and enthrallment between partners, the ability to sustain presence during communications can facilitate a deeper understanding and intimacy between a couple, thus strengthening their bond (Schwebel, Moss, & Fine, 1999). Moreover, perceptions of feeling understood by a romantic

partner (presence and empathy) facilitates the development of trust, mutual understanding and self-expression which ultimately increases relationship satisfaction (Cramer & Jowett, 2010).

Presence

The ability to be present during conversation fosters empathy, which increases feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment in romantic relationships. Empathy in relationship has been defined as feeling understood by ones' partner (Cramer & Jowett, 2010). More specifically, empathy can be described as having a felt sense of what another person is going through. As romantic partner's maintain undivided attention (presence) for one another during conversations, they are able to witness the emotional experience (facial cues, affect, body language, tone of voice) of their spouse, thus triggering the neural networks in their brain which identify with their partner's experience (De Vignemont & Singer, 2006). Thus reproducing the felt sense of their partner's experience within themselves. By way of this 'felt sense' (empathy) that is gleaned via presence, romantic partners have a greater ability to provide effective support to their partners which over time can increase feelings of trust and safety in romantic relationships (Kane et al., 2007). Moreover, empathy need not be accurate to elicit feelings of supportiveness. Research has shown that the perception of empathy by ones' partner, even if not accurate, produces feelings of being supported leading to increased relationship satisfaction (Cramer & Jowett, 2010; Cohen, Schulz, Weiss & Waldinger, 2012). Therefore, the empathic response that is triggered during uninterrupted, meaningful communication between romantic partners facilitates intimacy building as spouses perceive that their thoughts and feelings are being understood and accepted by their partner. In this way, empathy is a fundamental interpersonal skill for creating more fulfilling relationships (Cramer & Jowett, 2010).

Responsiveness

Additionally, responsiveness toward the needs of romantic partner's builds trust which has been found to increase intimacy and lead to more satisfying relationships. Adult theories of attachment posit that romantic partners turn to one another to have their needs for care and support met in times of distress (Kane et al., 2007). More so, couples turn toward one another when seeking affection and companionship (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). When these signals are attended to successfully, the bond between the couple strengthens and intimacy can develop. However, for this strategy to be effective, partners must have the ability to notice and respond to their partner's needs. This tendency is known as interpersonal responsiveness (Collins & Ford, 2010; Kane et al., 2007). Interpersonal responsiveness is defined as the degree to which partners are emotionally available to identify and attend to the needs of their spouse in a supportive manner and is a component of secure and satisfying romantic relationships (Kane et al., 2007). Partners' methods for conveying their responsiveness may differ depending on their unique relationship dynamic. For example, research has found that ones' ability to be responsive in romantic relationships can vary depending upon their attachment style; secure individuals exhibit less intrapersonal anxiety and avoidance and therefore have greater capacity for responsiveness (Kane et al., 2007). Additionally, current life circumstances (distraction, stressors), mental health, and relationship investment would also impact the extent to which a partner is able be responsive to the needs of their partner. The ability for each partner to recognize and respond to their partners signals of distress and bids for connection (verbal or non-verbal request to connect or feel close to ones' partner) facilitates intimacy (Ury, 2019). Specifically, responsive interactions signal to a partner in need that they matter and are cared for. Moreover, responsiveness by one partner informs the other partner of their level of commitment and reliability to their relationship (Kane et al., 2007), ultimately sending the message that this it is

safe to trust and show vulnerability to this person. In this way, relational responsiveness is a fundamental component of intimacy development and relationship satisfaction.

Although the extent to which closeness and intimacy are sought in relationship varies from couple to couple, research continues to identify mutual support, empathy and presence as fundamental components of satisfied couples' relationships (Kane et al., 2007). One of the ways that couples can convey their support for one another and build satisfying, lasting relationships is through their day to day interactions. The ability for couples to communicate and share parts of themselves with one another is fundamental to building intimacy and lays the foundation necessary for couples to get through more difficult times in their lives (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). However, the landscape for how couples communicate with one another has changed drastically with the advent of smart phones, and the reliance on Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) for connection, also known as Mobile Information Communication Technologies (MICT). Mobile Information Communication Technologies are any devices (e.g. smart phones, tablets) which are mobile and provide access to online communication networks (social media, email, text message). The conversational mediums available through MICT have expanded the possibilities for connection amongst romantic partners, however there is debate as to how effective these technologies are for maintaining intimacy in romantic relationships.

Technology Use and Romantic Relationships

The advent of smartphone technology has changed the ways that romantic partners' communicate with one another on a day to day basis. According to Lenhart and Duggan (2014) 93% of long term committed couples in North America report using a cellphone, and 71% of these couple's also use social media regularly. Mobile-phone applications designed for information sharing and communications (social media, Snap Chat, Face-time, and text

messaging) have provided efficient alternatives to face to face communications. According to interviews conducted with members of the digital generation, CMC are proclaimed to be preferred over face to face interactions as they afford greater self-image control and are less anxiety provoking than the spontaneous interaction that comes as a result of in-person conversations (Turkle, 2015). Furthermore, as North American couples continue to lead busy lives, CMC can be considered a way for partners to maintain communication when they are not able to be physically together; it is no longer a requirement for couples to be face to face with one another to achieve a sense of “connection”. Despite its efficiency and wide spread use, research continues to focus on the potential threats such as infidelity, jealousy, and addictive behaviours that CMC can bring forth for romantic relationships (McDaniel, Drouin, & Cravens, 2017; Alter, 2017; Elphinston & Noller, 2011). However, these technologies should also be considered as a tool that couples can utilize to maintain their relationship.

Technology for Maintaining Connection

Romantic partners engage with MICT as a way to maintain intimacy and connection with their partner’ when they are unable to be together. North American couples lead busy lives and as a result are spending less time having face to face interactions. Results of the Statistics Canada Survey (Government of Canada, 2016) found that 1.9 million couples in Canada have dual earner status as both partners are working outside the home. Further, over 1 million Canadians report having more than one job (Barnes, 2019). In addition to work, couples are balancing responsibilities of parenthood whilst attempting to allocate time for personal and family concerns. As a significant portion of couples’ daily lives are spent navigating these responsibilities, couples may not always be available for face to face communications with one another. MICT provides a relatively simple and efficient way for couples to stay in contact and

when apart. As such, MICT can be utilized as a mechanism through which couples provide emotional support to one another throughout their day. Research has found that text and Multimedia messaging (MMS) via mobile devices are frequently used by couples (especially younger generations) to stay in touch with one another and express affections (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson & Grant, 2011), and 36% of couples report messaging their partner on a daily basis to converse about the happenings of their day (Kennedy, Smith, Wells & Wellman, 2008). As such, the instant communication that cell phones afford allows couples to message one another about their thoughts and feelings in a real time manner which has the potential to facilitate feelings of connectedness; 21% of couples reported feeling closer to their partner as a result of CMC (Lenhart & Duggan, 2014). More so, CMC affords greater privacy than telephone conversations therefore couples' have noted preference for this medium when in the workplace or a busy setting (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson & Grant, 2011; Murray & Campbell, 2015). Whereas telephone conversations may be overheard by others, the content of a text message remains private between the texter and recipient. Thus, text messaging provides couples the ability to hold more intimate conversations throughout the day rather than waiting for a face to face setting. The element of privacy that texting affords provides a relatively secure space where couples can have intimate conversations and increase their feelings of closeness whilst simultaneously being apart. Further, the addition of emojis within text messages has enhanced connectivity during text messaging conversations.

The use of emojis during text messaging conversation has been shown to increase the closeness felt between romantic partners. As text messages do not contain the same voice and facial cues of face to face conversation, they run the risk of being misinterpreted and can contribute to tensions in relationships. However, studies have found that multi-media messaging

that includes emojis have the potential to increase intimacy between partners. According to Rodrigues, Lopes, Prada, Thompson and Garrido (2017) emoji use can facilitate affectionate expressions amongst partners thereby enhancing ones' perception of their relationship. The addition of an emoji in a text message can provide information on the tone of the message, thereby mimicking the cue's that are missing amongst digital communications. Furthermore, sending an emoji on its own can convey a strong message about ones' feelings toward their romantic partner thus reinforcing feelings of stability and satisfaction with the relationship (Rodrigues et al., 2017). For example, sending a heart emoji on its own is considered to be a signal of love and affection. Similarly, couples can use emojis to inform their partners on a whole range of feelings they may be experiencing (happy, sad, distressed, annoyed, angry, nauseous, loved) therefore allowing partners a way to communicate feelings that they may not have the words to express. The ability to use an emoji to convey ones' current feeling state toward their partner provides information that some individuals may have difficulty expressing in a face to face conversation (shame and sadness for example). By way of using emojis, individuals are able to provide more detail into their current feeling state, thereby allowing the recipient of the emoji to better understand how their partner is doing and respond appropriately (ask questions, provide support, lighten the mood). As such, the use of emojis during text messaging can assist in the expression of feelings for partner's who lack the emotional vocabulary to express themselves. As emojis have been found to minimize misinterpretations within CMC, couples are beginning to rely on technologies to have more serious conversations with one another.

Technology for Conflict Management

Computer mediated communications (CMC) are used to resolve arguments and tensions between partners in romantic relationship. Research has shown that some couples prefer to use CMC to discuss issues of conflict, as putting their words into a message (email, direct message, text) allows them time to reflect on the problem and more accurately convey their perspective (Rodrigues et al., 2017). Further, Scissors and Gergle (2013) explain that engaging in conflict via technology allows for greater emotional management which can reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation (Scissors & Gergle, 2013). As the design of CMC allows for people to be simultaneously engaged with one another whilst being physically apart, partners are able to gain distance and subsequently perspective on the conflict at hand; conflicts may escalate quickly in person as it can be hard for couples' to effectively manage their negative emotions in the heat of the moment (Scissors & Gergle, 2013). By using CMC to discuss the issue, couples can engage in conversation when they feel prepared to do so thus affording a chance for them to emotionally regulate prior to responding. More so, conflict arising in face to face situations may be perceived as threatening for partners. As such some couples report preferring to deal with conflicts in their relationship via text or email as they feel that they have more control over their emotions, how they are seen by their partner, and are able to clarify misunderstandings more effectively through CMC (Coyne et al., 2011); behaviours or responses that may be interpreted as negative by one's partner and therefore conflict escalating can be managed with computer mediated communications (Scissors & Gergle, 2013). For example, one may roll their eyes unintentionally, or have an aggressive tone of voice in speaking with their partner during a face to face conflict which may escalate the situation. However, when arguing via a technological medium these expressions and tone of voices are not present. Partners can take time to regulate

their “negative” emotions prior to engaging with their partner. By way of being able to regulate themselves, couples are better able to express themselves without their emotional reactions getting in the way of resolving the conflict at which point couples may decide to switch to telephone or a face to face conversation.

Computer mediated communications have become a resource that couples are turning toward to facilitate and maintain communications with one another throughout their busy lives. As indicated above, the kinds of conversations that couples are having through CMC are specific to the needs and dynamics of each unique couple. However, sending quick messages of affection, organization and task sharing, and addressing conflict are some of the more common communications being held through MICT. Despite the apparent variety and usefulness of CMC in maintaining couples’ relationships, researchers continue to highlight the potential for misinterpretation and conflict escalation that can occur as a result of the functionality of MICT (Riva, 2002); without the context of verbal cues, tone of voice and expression that face to face communication affords, it is easy to misinterpret CMC thus disrupting connectedness. Furthermore, there is concern that the elements that make modern technologies, such as CMC, so appealing are also addictive by design (Alter, 2017) which brings forth concerns for how the use of MICT may be impacting our brains, and ultimately how we connect with our romantic partners.

Technology Use and the Brain

The brain is wired for human beings to form connections with one another (Siegel, 2015). From birth, the human brain relies on the interactions with other people in order to develop the capacities necessary for survival in our social world (Siegel, 2012); the formation of empathy, and the innate human ability for meaning making are contingent on the connections formed with

important others while in infancy (Siegel, 2012) More so, the kinds of interactions people have with their romantic partners have the potential to influence ones' sense of self throughout the lifespan (Siegel, 2012). One way in which this occurs is via contingent communications.

Contingent communication refers to the exchange of information that takes place when an individual sends a message out to another person and receives feedback via the response (Siegel, 2015). An example of contingent communication: an infant is crying and their parent responds by embracing them and softly speaking loving words to them. In this instance the infant's message (crying) was received by the mother and responded too in a timely manner (being embraced and soothed) thus providing the infant with feedback. According to Daniel Siegel, contingent communications impact brain development as each time a message is responded to in a timely and effective manner, a rush of the neurotransmitter dopamine is sent to the reward centres of the human brain which then reinforces the action (Siegel, 2015). Further, according to theories of attachment, the communications sent and the responses received begin to inform an individual's sense of self (for example, I am loveable, I am worthy) (Bowlby, as cited in Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In this way, communications with another person are not only for social purposes, but the responses to communications can reinforce behaviour. Contingent communications are not unique to face to face interactions. The modern-day technology culture that is prevalent in North America relies on formations of contingent communication to keep people using their devices (smartphones, tablets, laptops).

Feedback and Addiction

By way of using interactive interfaces that allow for communication and feedback, modern technologies create a compelling interface that is difficult for many users to disengage

from¹. Information technologies have become much more interactive and engaging over the last decade (Naik & Shivalingaiah, 2009). The first generation of online technologies were used primarily for information sourcing; people would access the internet to look up vast amounts of information however there was no ability to engage with this information (Naik & Shivalingaiah, 2009); people could read a news article online but would not be able to add their comments, or thoughts, for example. However, online technologies of the 21st century allow people to create and upload their own information. More so, the internet has become a hub for socializing and information sharing (social media, text messaging, blogs, emails). The internet of today's generation (Web 3.0) is a portal through which people are sending and receiving communications (Naik & Shivalingaiah, 2009). This modern online world is designed in such a way that each action taken online provides some kind of feedback, which in turn motivates people to continue to engage with this online technology. According to Alter (2017), it is the mechanism of near constant feedback that the online world provides which contributes to the addictiveness of technology. Similar to contingent communication, timely feedback to the action one takes online will provide a reinforcing surge of dopamine to the brain (Alter 2017; Siegel, 2015), thus providing a reward for going online. More so, the design of the interface of the online world makes the feedback loop even more pervasive as individuals are able to obtain multiple kinds of feedback simultaneously. Rather than sending out a single message that is received and responded to (as is the case with face to face conversation), the efficient design of

¹ This paper will discuss elements which make technology addictive within the context of social relationships. It will provide discourse and tools relevant to couples with problematic technology use. Technology addiction (behavioural addiction) is beyond the scope of this capstone project. For further information and resources on technology addiction refer to Atler (2017).

the internet allows for people to send out multiple messages at any given time thereby connecting them to an unlimited number of other people online. However, unlike face to face communications, sending out multiple messages does not guarantee each will be responded too. In this way, MICT creates an addictive feedback loop where for each message that is responded to in a timely manner, a surge of dopamine occurs in the brain, thus rewarding the person so they continue to send out communications in the hopes of getting a response. Additionally, the mechanism of feedback is not specific to CMC; online gaming, shopping and social media all have a similar design where feedback is provided for ones' online actions. In this way, the feedback delivered by computers is reinforcing the brain in such a way that people are becoming hooked on their devices.

Stopping Cues

Furthermore, CMC often lacks stopping cues which signal to the human brain that it is time to disengage from the device (Alter, 2017). Online communication platforms have seemingly endless amounts of interactive information that keep people hooked on their devices. More so, this information is designed to be stimulating and reinforcing (feedback) thereby keeping people engaged for long periods of time (Alter, 2017). During a face to face, or even telephone conversation, individuals pick up on voice tone and words expressed to determine when the conversation is coming to an end. However, text and social media communications rarely provide the user with cues that the conversation is coming to an end. Rather, CMC can trail on endlessly if neither person in the conversation provides an overt message that they are leaving the chat. Alter (2017) refers to these overt and subtle messages of closing a conversation as 'stopping cues.' More specifically, stopping cues are the pauses or natural ends to conversations that signal to the brain that the current task or conversation has completed, thereby

allowing the switching of tasks to take place (Alter, 2017). However, Alter has noted that many of the technological interfaces that people frequent are designed in such a way that purposefully doesn't include these cues (2017); by not including stopping cues, people will remain engaged online longer as there are no pauses to queue their brains to switch tasks. The interface of Facebook provides a prime example of the absence of stopping cues: Facebook enables various methods of social interactions (wall posts, private messages, direct message chats). Individuals scroll through their news feed and when they see a post which interests them, they can like, share, comment or post on their friend's wall. By taking any action on a friend's post, the individual will now receive notifications of every other person who also takes an action on this same post. More so, all of these posts, likes, shares or comments take place on the main feed page so that rather than being provided with a pause where an individual might stop and disengage from the interface, the brain jumps to the next interesting post. In this way, Facebook and other similarly designed social media sites (Instagram, Tinder, Plenty of Fish) maintain a cycle of stimulation with no cues signalling disengagement. These deliberate designs are concerning as they can distract people from listening to their internal bodily cues (fatigue, hunger, emotional needs), and also perpetuate technology addictions (Alter, 2017). With the increasing accessibility and attractiveness of online communication technologies, researchers are beginning to question how use of these devices are impacting brain development.

Technology use, the Brain and Cognition

There is also a growing concern for how the increasing use of internet technology may be altering the cognitive process and structures of the brain. The internet provides an endless source of information of which our brains must navigate and process which places significant demands on our cognitive capacities (Misra & Stokols, 2012). Moreover, the efficiency through which

MICT operates and the engaging activities they provide increases the likelihood for multitasking (Moreno et al., 2012). As such, individuals are most often doing multiple tasks at a given time. They may be searching for information whilst replying to emails and/or text messages and updating social media, for example. This constant shifting of attention takes a toll on cognitive abilities; task switching is cognitively demanding therefore limiting the attentional capacity that one has to retain the information that they are reading (Loh & Kanai, 2015). As the cognitive demand increases, and attentional capacity depletes, individuals are less able to take in the information that they are reading. Research has found that internet users have developed a tendency toward text scanning behaviours rather than an in-depth processing of materials (Liu, 2005 as cited in Loh & Kanai, 2015). Further, the overload of information presented online makes it difficult to discern what is important and worth retaining. This shift toward shallow over depth information processing as facilitated by the online environment is concerning as depth processing is necessary for the development of critical thought and reflection (Wolf, 2008 as cited in Loh & Kanai, 2015) which are important skills for holding face to face conversations.

Alternatively, face to face communication facilitates the development of the emotional centres of the brain, and there is concern that the increase of CMC is altering the brain structures necessary for human emotion (connection). The right hemisphere of the brain is implicated more strongly in emotional processing and plays a fundamental role in attachment bonding (Schoore, 2005). The right hemisphere has been linked to empathy, interpersonal skills and emotional recognition (Perry et al., 2001) amongst other processes. Thus, when individuals have face to face conversations, the right hemisphere of their brain becomes activated by way of witnessing facial cues, voice tones and the body language of the person they are engaging with (Siegel, 2015). However, CMC does not provide the same interpersonal cues, thus the act of text

messaging or writing an email relies more heavily on logic than emotion which is mediated more strongly by the left hemisphere (Siegel, 2015). As CMC does not engage the emotional centres of the brain the same way as face to face communications, there is a growing concern for how an over-reliance on CMC may hinder the development of empathy and meaningful connection amongst younger “tech native” generations. As the left, logical brain is activated during CMC, researchers are concerned that the ability to engage the emotional right brain may diminish (Siegel, 2015). In this way, there is concern that individuals who use CMC over face to face communications may begin to experience difficulties in navigating their social-emotional world. According to Daniel Siegel (2015), as left hemisphere stimulating communications are being favored over the right hemisphere, people may begin to have shallower experiences of others and the world around them. These changes to the brain’s capacity for emotional connection as a result of CMC can lead to increasing mental health challenges (depression, anxiety, substance misuse) as individuals become increasingly disconnected from themselves and others.

Relationship Counselling and Technology

The ways in which couples interact with each other informs the practice of relationship counselling. Couples’ therapists, John & Julie Gottman (The Gottman Institute, 2015), have dedicated much of their scholarly lives to researching intimate relationships and have developed the Gottman Method Couples Therapy as a result of their research. Specifically, the Gottman’s considered the “masters and disasters” of relationships to determine the elements necessary for mutually satisfying and lasting romantic relationships (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Through this research, they have highlighted the importance of positive interactions between partners for the long-term sustainability of their relationship. The Gottman’s have designed their therapeutic model with the goals of helping couples’ work through conflict, achieve intimacy, respect and to create

shared meaning and empathy (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; The Gottman Institute, 2015). One component of Gottman's model of Couple Therapy is the concept of *The Sound Relationship House* (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). The Sound Relationship House is a guide that therapists can use in assisting couples who are struggling to maintain connection and positive interactions with one another; the steps provided are aimed to help couples build intimacy through affectionate communication, presence and meaning making (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Many of the tasks within a Gottman couples' framework involve the therapist assisting the couples to identify ineffective patterns of interaction and work with them to construct more positive, relationship enhancing alternatives (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Thus, Gottman's Couple Therapy Method can be considered as a method for rebuilding connections between partners. As couples' interactions are an integral component to relationship success and satisfaction, as is indicated by the Gottman Method (Gottman & Gottman, 2008), knowledge of the ways that technologies, such as CMC, are impacting relationship interactions are essential to therapists working with couples who are seeking to improve their connection.

Often, couples' attending therapy are experiencing relational distress, disconnection and looking to address issues of intimacy with their partner (Miller, Yorgason, Sandberg & White, 2003). Prior to the provision of tools to address a couples' needs, an assessment of the interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors, including the relationship's strengths and weaknesses are important to fully understand the factors contributing to the couple's distress (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). A couples' use of MICT is an area which should be included in assessment as it can yield important information regarding the couples' pattern of interaction when they are together as well as apart from one another. For example, by way of understanding the ways in which MICT are being used for both personal use and relationship maintenance, therapists may

be able to identify potential areas of missed connections. Further, identifying the frequency that CMC is used in comparison to face to face communications provides an avenue for psycho-education on intimacy. As MICT is quickly becoming a normalized form of communication in romantic relationships, counsellors can benefit from understanding the impact that these technologies have on their client's relationships. Additionally, knowledge of the ways in which MICT can assist couples to maintain their relationships (e.g. Apps for schedule coordination, cultivating more meaningful conversations) can equip counsellors to offer innovative ways of addressing issues of disconnection and even increase intimacy for technology inclined couples. Therefore, a therapist's ability to assess for MICT use in relationships, its impacts on intimacy as well as the specific ways that couples can utilize technologies to benefit their relationships is valuable for the therapeutic process.

The proliferation of smart phone technology has made CMC an efficient and accessible way for North Americans to stay in touch with loved ones throughout their busy days. Thus, it makes sense that many couples have turned toward these technologies as a tool for relationship maintenance and connection. However, scholars are beginning to identify the inherently addictive features of MICT (Alter, 2017; Siegel, 2015) and how its use is impacting the brain's capacity for meaningful connection. This research brings forth concerns over how much of ones' time spent using CMC (over face to face communication) is of benefit to relationships. Does the efficiency of "connection" that these technologies afford truly enable meaningful connection amongst couples'? Or does MICT detract from the intimacy of presence that couples' therapists deem necessary for relationship satisfaction? (Gottman & Gottman, 2008).

The next chapter of this capstone will explore the research available on MICT and romantic relationships to determine how the use of these technologies is impacting couples'

abilities to be present, empathic and attuned to their partner thus contributing to the over-all satisfaction of their relationships. As couples' frequently attend couples therapy together to work on improving intimacy and connection, this research will provide essential information for the role that MICT plays in this process, ultimately affording counsellors knowledge necessary to harness the benefits of technology in couples' relationships.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of the current literature on Mobile Information Communication Technology (MICT) and romantic relationships in order to better understand how they impact presence, empathy and satisfaction between romantic partners. Specifically, this chapter will critically examine studies of MICT (mobile phones and social networking sites) and their impact on engagement, attentional capacity, intimacy and overall relationship satisfaction. Additionally, research regarding the role of attachment in MICT use will be considered. This chapter will close with a presentation of research on new directions for the navigation of MICT in romantic relationships.

Mobile Information Communication Technology and Quality of Engagement

Research has identified that MICT can serve as a distraction from face to face communication as they impact levels of engagement between partners. Researchers, Przybylski & Weinstein (2012) sought to examine how having a mobile phone present would impact the quality of human face to face interactions. They conducted two experiments during which strangers held conversations of varying levels of intimacy while a cell phone was either present (sitting on a desk outside of direct view), or absent (a pocket notebook on the desk instead of a cellphone). The first experiment had dyads discussing any interesting topic that occurred over the past month (moderate intimacy condition). Whereas the second experiment varied the intimacy

of conversation by having the content be either casual or meaningful. After the conversations were had, the researchers asked the participants to rate their perception of relationship quality, sense of partner closeness and perceived empathy of their partner. For both conditions, the results indicated that the presence of mobile phones on the desk had “inhibited the development of interpersonal closeness and trust and reduced the extent to which individuals felt empathy and understanding from their partners (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012). Furthermore, the more meaningful the topic of conversation was, the greater disruption that the presence of the mobile phone had on the relational connection; partners perceived less empathy and engagement from one another when there was a mobile phone sitting on the desk. The researchers explained that the presence of cellphones serve as a mental cue to alternative social networks, thus when people are having an in-person discussion with their phones nearby they are not fully engaged in the conversation, rather the phone has primed them to direct their mental focus toward potentially rewarding social interactions that are waiting for them on their mobile devices (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012).

Przybylski & Weinstein (2012) found that when cellphones are present during face to face conversations, they serve as a distraction which hinders the development of interpersonal closeness (empathy and engagement) between partners. Interestingly, the cellular devices that were used in Przybylski & Weinstein’s (2012) study were not owned by the participants. Rather, these phones were placed by the researchers in areas that were visible to the participants. As such, the intensity of distraction that cellphones pose may not be accurately represented in this study. The ownership of the cellphone would likely increase the distractibility of the device and have further implications on empathy and engagement. In real world scenarios, cellphones that are present during face to face interactions are owned by the individuals engaged in

conversation. Thus, in addition to serving as a prime for social engagements online, the cellphone may be notifying the owner of messages and phone call notifications that are intended for them making it likely that the cellphone owner would feel increasingly compelled to check their messages while in the presence of their partner. In Przybylski & Weinstein's (2012) study, the participants did not have an attachment to the cell phones presented. Therefore, this is a variable that likely impacted the findings. The effect that cellphones have on attentional capacity are likely to be intensified in real world relationships as people hold meaningful connections to their devices and the wider social networks that they represent.

Furthermore, although Przybylski & Weinstein's (2012) study was with stranger dyads, the results can be considered applicable to intimate partner relationships. Meaningful conversations, such as those which involve self-disclosure of ones' thoughts and feelings facilitate intimacy within romantic partnerships (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). Przybylski & Weinstein's (2012) research indicates that it is precisely these kinds of communications that are being disrupted when cellphones are present; partners in the meaningful conversation condition described feeling less understood by their partner's when they were speaking in the presence of a cellphone.

If the presence of cellphones is diminishing ones' ability to focus on a conversation being had with a stranger, it is likely that this inference is also taking place in romantic partnerships which would have implications for the relationship. The stakes for emotional connection are much higher in romantic relationships than between strangers, therefore regularly being distracted by a cellphone while conversing with one's partner can have a destructive impact on relational connection. The responsiveness of a partner toward their spouse's self-disclosures is necessary for intimacy as it indicates that this person is understood, cared for and respected

(Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). In this way, a lack of responsiveness (for example a failure to acknowledge or empathize) due to mobile phone distraction can begin to cultivate feelings of rejection within ones' spouse, which over time may lead to relationship deterioration. However, these same interpretations of distraction are not necessarily felt when conversing with a stranger. Moreover, when partner's frequently sense that their spouse is distracted from the conversation at hand, relationship ruptures may begin to take place; feelings of jealousy, rejection and resentment may arise which can lead partners to close off from one another (Winch, 2015; Przybylki & Weinstein, 2012). For example, partner's may become less inclined to attempt self-disclosures if they continually feel as though their spouse is not present during the conversation as a result of cellphone distraction. In this way, partners may feel discouraged from sharing about themselves as their attempts at connection are continuously not being reciprocated or empathized with (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012).

Similarly, in a study called the *The Iphone effect: The Quality of In-person Social Interactions in the Presence of Mobile Devices*, conducted by Misra, Cheng, Genevie and Yuan (2014) they examined how the presence of mobile phones in real life conversations impact feelings of interpersonal connectedness and empathic concern during real life conversations between partners. Rather than utilizing a laboratory setting, Misra et al. (2014) conducted a field study in a local coffee shop that had been pre-selected by research assistants. Pre-selection was used to ensure variation of activity, characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity) and number of patrons (participants) available. The researchers sought to ensure there was an interpersonal connection between participants studied; to do this, the researchers approached individuals with pre-existing connections to one another who entered the coffee shop and invited them to take place in a study about social interactions (Misra et al., 2014). These participants were then randomly assigned

into either a casual (discuss thoughts and feelings about plastic holiday trees) or meaningful conversation condition (discuss the most meaningful events of the past year) while a confederate researcher observed the conversations from a distance. These confederates were tasked with noting the presence of any type of mobile device (Misra et al., 2014). At the end of their conversations, the participants completed a survey measuring interpersonal connectedness and empathic concern (Misra et al., 2014). When mobile devices were not present, participants indicated having felt more empathy and interpersonal connectedness in the conversation. Conversely, participants noted that less empathy was conveyed when a mobile device was present during the conversation. Moreover, the participants rated conversations as less fulfilling, regardless of which condition they were in when there was a mobile device present (Misra et al., 2014). This finding was stronger for participants who identified as having a closer pre-existing relationship to one another (e.g. the closer the relationship the more disruptive the presence of a mobile device). Misra et al.'s (2014) findings provide support for the notion that the impact of cellphone distractibility is more significant for close relationships.

The research by Przybylski & Weinstein (2012) and Misra et al.'s (2014) indicates that the intimacy of presence necessary for the development of meaningful connections (empathy, engagement, self-disclosure) is disrupted when mobile devices are present. The cellphone appears to represent larger social networks; thus, attention is divided between the present moment and other possibilities for connection resulting in individuals being physically present but absent in mind when primed with a mobile device. This absent presence (Misra et al., 2014) is destructive to romantic relationships as it is hampering couples' ability to be present, empathic and attuned to one another.

Social Networking and Intimacy

Social Networking Sites (SNS) have been implicated in contributing to relationship dissatisfaction (Yacoub, Spoede, Cutting, & Hawley, 2018). Researchers Hand, Thomas, Buboltz, Deemer, and Buyanjargal (2013) considered how intimacy in romantic relationships is impacted by online SNS use. By way of examining couples personal use (individually) and their perception of their partner's social media use, the researchers sought to determine the impacts of SNS on intimacy and relationship satisfaction. Participants were asked to complete surveys on the amount of time spent on SNS (amount of time both participants and partners spent), a Relationship Assessment Scale (measures of partner's attitudes toward their relationship and partner), and measures of intimacy (emotional, social, sexual and recreational intimacy) and relationship quality were completed. Hand et al. (2013) found that there was a significant negative relationship between the perceptions of ones' partner's SNS use and intimacy but that this relationship was not found when considering ones' own social media use. According to Hand et al. (2013) this finding can be explained by the tendency to attribute problematic behaviours to others rather than oneself. Additionally, Hand et al. (2013) believe that jealousy may be a contributing factor to the negative relationship between social media use and intimacy, although this was not expanded upon. Perhaps, partners who experience an increase in jealousy when their spouse engages with social media experience difficulty with intimate connection as they perceive that their partner's social networking may result in infidelity, or if they perceive that time spent social networking is displacing time spent together.

Hand et al. (2013) did not find a significant relationship between relationship satisfaction and either individual online social networking or perceived partner online usage, to which the researchers hypothesized that intimacy was acting as a buffer. Indeed, studies have found that

acts of physical intimacy in romantic relationships (kissing, sexual intercourse, hand holding, hugs, for example.) can enhance positive affect thus buffering against the physiological impacts of stresses of daily living (Ditzen, Hoppman, & Klumb, 2008). However, recent research examining the role of online social networking sites (twitter, Facebook) have found that increased use of online social networking results in negative outcomes for relationships such as conflicts, infidelity and divorce (Clayton, 2014; McGee, 2014). Achieving intimacy in romantic relationships requires time dedicated to understanding ones' partner on an emotional level; the development of mutual connection by way of sharing personal feelings and intimate moments is necessary for intimacy (Hand et al., 2013; Overbeek, Ha, Scholte, de Kemp & Engels, 2007). If participants are spending more time involved online and less time engaging with their romantic partners, it is unlikely that intimacy is being maintained to the point of being able to act as a buffer to the effects of online social networking use. As such, the amount of *time* spent on social networking sites in comparison to relationship maintenance may better explain the findings that social networking use did not impact relationship satisfaction. In their study, Hand et al. (2013) calculated social networking usage into weekday and weekend use which does not provide an accurate figure on how much time participants were spending on online social networking sites in comparison to time spent with their partner. If the participants time spent with their partner's overall is exceeding that of their time spent on online social networking, it is possible that relationship satisfaction may not be impacted as the couple's connection continues to be maintained despite social networking use. However, when time spent on online social networking exceeds, or detracts from time spent with one's partner, conflicts are more likely to arise, and relationship satisfaction would decrease as tending to the relational connection is diminished. As such, it would be necessary to also examine how much time participants spent on

online social networking in comparison to time spent with their spouse's overall to clarify the relationship between social networking, intimacy and relationship satisfaction.

Technology and Relationship Satisfaction

Research into the impact of cellphone use on relationship satisfaction has found that checking ones' phone while in the presence of a romantic partner is a common occurrence that often leads to conflict between partners. Roberts & David (2016) explored the occurrence of "phubbing" as it relates to conflict and relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships. "Phubbing" or "phone snubbing" is defined by the researchers as the act of attending to ones' cell phone and/or being distracted by their device while spending time with their romantic partner (Roberts & David, 2016). Using a 9-item measure of phubbing which was developed and tested by the researchers, Roberts & David sought to determine the effect phubbing on intimate relationships. The participants (n=145) consisted of U.S based male and female representatives from MTurk, an online data collection service owned by Amazon (McCredie & Morey, 2018). Participants were surveyed on their perceptions of their partner's cellphone use while together (researcher survey) and measures of phone conflict and satisfaction in both life and romantic relationships were also completed. Roberts & David's (2016) results found that the act of phubbing undermines relationship satisfaction as it leads to conflict between romantic partners. Additionally, Roberts & David (2016) considered attachment style in relation to the impact of phubbing behaviour and found that although the act of phubbing is related to conflict generally, those with insecure attachment styles experienced greater conflict during this behaviour than securely attached individuals.

The finding that phubbing behaviour results in increased conflict for insecurely attached individuals suggests that the distress experienced maybe as a result of the internal dialogue that

arises for spouses when being phubbed. Attachment theory posits that our beliefs about our worth, and how we deserve to be treated arise from our early experiences with caregivers (Collins & Read, 1990). Thus, if a child's needs were frequently unattended too in infancy, they may develop a view of self as less important than others which may be triggered upon in their adult romantic relationships. Therefore, those with insecure attachments (beliefs of unworthiness) may be more sensitized to actions which bring forth these early attachment wounds, such as phubbing behaviour. In this way, being phubbed or ignored by ones' partner may recreate the feelings of unworthiness that one had in relationship to their caregiver. Essentially, the consequent internal dialogue is that they are not as important as the phone, which may result in greater conflict than would be the case if an insecure attachment was not present. Therefore, phubbing behaviour can be especially detrimental in relationships with partners' who experience insecure attachment styles.

In their study, Roberts & David (2016) relied on the use of self-survey and recruited participants via MTurk, an online database owned by Amazon. As such, there was little information provided on these individuals demographics and how this may have impacted their research. Roberts & David's study could have been enhanced by gathering additional data in relation to their participant demographic, their relationship status and self-reported frequency of phone use and creating an experimental design rather than relying on self-report surveys. As the researchers discuss in their limitations section, relationship conflict may be more prevalent for partnerships where only one individual is frequently using their phone while the other does not have a cellphone (Roberts & David, 2016); in this dynamic, it is understandable that one member of the relationship is feeling snubbed and/or ignored by their partners phone use as they are not engaged with a cellphone. However, if both partners were simultaneously using their phones

while in the presence of one another, then perhaps the impacts of phubbing on relationship satisfaction would be less impactful. Furthermore, it is important to be critical of the results of a self-report survey as researchers are relying on the participants ability to recall past experiences and their feelings of those moments. In this way, this study may provide more significant results if done as an experimental design using real life participant couples and manipulating the distractors present on the phone (text messages, ringing, social media notifications) in order to recreate the feeling of being phubbed. By doing so, the participants would be able to provide a more accurate description of their thoughts and feelings in relation to the act of phubbing and how this impacts their current level of satisfaction with their partner.

In their study, “Technoference”: The interference of technology in couple relationships and implications for women’s personal and relational well-being, McDaniel and Coyne (2016) considered the impact that technology interference has on romantic relationships. More specifically, McDaniel & Coyne (2016) examined the frequency with which technology interferes in the lives of cohabitating couples, and the impact this has on women’s satisfaction with their relationships. By way of looking at daily usage of technology in the participants relationships, the researchers hypothesized that the more technological interruptions that take place in a given day the greater likelihood of conflict and the less satisfied the relationship would be rated. Their study recruited female heterosexual participants (n=143) who were either in cohabitating or married relationships. The participants completed an online survey which examined technology interference, personal and relational wellbeing and internet use. In particular, the survey considered how often a technological device interrupted interactions with ones’ partner and how frequently conflict arose out of situations involving technologies. Moreover, the study considered different kinds of technological devices in order to determine

which were most frequently interfering in the lives of couples (laptops, computers, cellphones, televisions) (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016).

The results of McDaniel and Coyne's (2016) study found that computers and cellphones were the most frequently used devices, and that incidents of technoferece were frequent, especially during the couples' leisure time. Moreover, technology interference resulted in conflict over technology use in the relationship. The participants identified technology interference and disruption with leisure time (62%), mealtime (33%) and the technology use interrupted conversations (35%) at least once per day (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). The greater frequency of reported technoferece, the more conflict that was reported by the participants. McDaniel & Coyne (2016) explained that technology use results in conflict when technology is prioritized over the romantic relationship as it sends a message to the partner about their value. More so, regular interruptions by way of technology make it difficult for meaningful conversations to take place between partners (McDaniel and Coyne, 2016). The findings of McDaniel and Coyne's (2016) study are similar to that of Roberts and David (2016) in that relationship conflict increases when more time and attention are given to technological devices at the expense of quality time spent with one's partner.

However, McDaniel and Coyne's results were based on self-survey of participants who were recruited for the study via flyers and emails (2016). As such it is important to consider how the use of these participant recruiting methods and study design may have contributed to a self-selection and confirmation bias which potentially inflated their findings. By way of selecting participants based on their experiences of technoferece in their relationship, and then self-surveying these same participants, McDaniel and Coyne (2016) have created a scenario for participants to potentially overestimate their everyday experience of technoferece related

conflict. For example, an individual who already believes that technology use is problematic in their relationship receives an invitation from a research group asking for their experience of technofence. This individual is more likely to want to take part in the study and may potentially over estimate their experience; as technology use in their relationship is a source of aggravation for them they may even seek out studies of this nature to participate in (self - selection). Conversely, an individual who does not find technology use bothersome in their relationship may be less inclined to take part in their study and may ignore their invitation. In this way McDaniel and Coyne may not be recruiting a representative sample of participants from which to study. As such, it is important to consider that the significant results found in McDaniel and Coyne's study be viewed within the context of confirmation bias and self-selection that may have occurred.

Although mobile devices can be a hindrance to intimacy in romantic relationships, cellphones are frequently used by romantic partners to stay in touch with one another. Text and multimedia messaging are especially common methods of communication used by couples (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011). Yet, the impersonal nature of a text messages (lacking in tone of voice and verbal/ facial cues) makes it hard to discern empathy and engagement from the sender which can impact the quality of communication in the relationship. Moreover, research has found that the preference for computerized messaging may be influenced by attachment style (Lou, 2014; Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser & Westerman, 2013), and that the modality of relationship communication has implications for relationship satisfaction.

Morey et al., (2013) used attachment theory to predict participants use of communication technologies in their romantic relationships. They hypothesized that individuals with an avoidant attachment style would prefer computer mediated communication methods with their partner

(less intimate and frequent) such as email. Whereas anxiously attached individuals would be inclined to use more immediate forms of communications (telephone calling and text messaging). Additionally, the researchers hypothesized that more intimate modes of communication would equate to better relationship quality. Morey et al. (2013) collected survey data from two different cohorts of college students at different times – in 2009, and 2011 – to account for advancements in technological communications. Both cohorts of participants in 2009 (n=135) and 2011 (n=145) were psychology undergraduate students who self-identified as being in a romantic relationship at the time of the study. The participants completed online surveys on their attachment style, relationship quality and frequency of communication modalities (e.g. telephone, email, social networking site and text messaging). The researchers found that individuals who scored higher on avoidant attachment were less likely to use telephone communications and more likely to prefer email. Similarly, participants who identified as anxiously attached also tended to utilize less intimate forms of communication (Morey et al., 2013). However, participants who reported more frequent communications (both through text and telephone) perceived their relationship more positively than those who did not (Morey et al., 2013). These findings highlight the importance of communication for relationship satisfaction, yet the kinds of communications that satisfy each partnership may be dependent upon ones' attachment style.

Lou (2014) sought to clarify how attachment style impacts texting behaviour and romantic relationship satisfaction. They examined texting behaviour and attachment style amongst university school participants (n=395), all of whom indicated being in a romantic relationship at the time of the study. The participants completed questionnaires assessing their texting behaviour (amount of texts received and sent between partners), including overall texting

share (amount of communications over text versus face to face, phone or email). Additionally, measures of attachment style and relationship satisfaction were completed. Lou (2014), hypothesized that insecurely attached individuals (avoidant/ anxious dimensions) would have greater share of communications with their partner over text, and that greater share of texting in comparison to other forms of communication would be associated with lower relationship satisfaction. The results found that the higher individuals scored on attachment anxiety or avoidance, the more that these individuals relied on text messaging in comparison with other forms of communication with their partners (Lou, 2014). Additionally, the greater the share of communications done via text message the less satisfied participants indicated being in their romantic relationships. Lou (2014) found that as partner's texting communications increased, the face to face communications decreased. Interestingly, text messaging volume on its own did not predict relationship satisfaction, it was only when text conversation began to displace face to face communications that relationship satisfaction was impacted (Lou, 2014).

The research by Morey et al. (2013) and Lou (2014) provide important information on the role that ones' attachment style has on communication and intimacy preferences. In reviewing the research, it is possible that attachment style appears to determine just how much intimacy a person is comfortable with: as such, they seem to mediate their communication modalities accordingly. According to the findings by Morey et al. (2013) and Lou (2014), there is an interplay between ones' attachment style, the frequency of communication and preferred modality (telephone, text, email) in romantic relationships which appears to determine the level of satisfaction between partners. For example, individuals who are insecurely attached may prefer less frequent and direct communication with their partner and find this just as satisfying as partner's who are securely attached and have more frequent conversation. Therefore, it is not

simply frequency of communication that predicts relationship satisfaction. Rather, it is whether or not the modality(s) of communication allows for a level of intimacy that is comfortable and satisfying for the particular couple.

Future Directions

Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) are commonly used for relationship maintenance amongst romantic couples (Eden & Veksler, 2016). As such, having established a set of agreed upon rules for cellphone use in relationship can be a way to mitigate conflict and increase satisfaction with romantic partnerships. Recognizing the importance of cellphones for relationship maintenance, Miller-Ott, Kelly & Duran (2012) sought to examine cellphone rules and how they relate to both cellphone (how positive one feels about the use of cellphones in their relationship) and romantic relationship satisfaction (how positive one feels about their relationship). Undergraduate participants (n=277) completed a series of surveys including the importance of cellphone communication in their relationship (part one), the cellphone rules they abide by (part two) and a measure of their cellphone and relationship satisfaction (part three). By way of these surveys, the researchers identified cellphone usage rules that were related to relationship satisfaction; rules that indicated how to manage conflict with cellphones (e.g. prohibiting text fighting), and repetitive contact (e.g. agreeing to not place limits on the frequency within which partners can contact one another during the day) were positively impacting relationships (Miller-Ott, Kelly, & Duran, 2012).

However, rules about the frequency of contacting others while partners were spending time together were negatively related to overall satisfaction with cellphones but had no predictive impact on relationship satisfaction. The researchers hypothesized that rules which restricted one's ability to stay in contact with others in the presence of ones' partner may elicit

feelings of diminished freedom (Miller-Ott, Kelly, & Duran (2012). This is an interesting finding as research has previously established that using ones' cellphone while in the presence of a romantic partner can lead to conflict (Roberts & David, 2016) relationship interference (Coyne & McDaniel, 2014) and decreased intimacy between partners (Hand et al., 2013); all of which tends to impact relationship satisfaction. The current study may be able to clarify the findings regarding rules about frequency of contact with others and relationship satisfaction by including a measure of technology interference, such as the Technology Device Interference Scale (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014) in their study.

Although Miller-Ott, Kelly, & Duran (2012) had participants respond to a cellphone satisfaction measure involving their relationships, the generality of the survey questions may not have picked up on technology interference within the participants relationships. As such, it is not clear the extent to which technology is interfering in the relationships of the participants in this study. Without a more sensitive measure to verify, it is possible that these participants did not experience cellphone interruptions (e.g. phubbing) in their relationships. Therefore, having a rule about the frequency of contact with others would be redundant and possibly create more conflict within the relationship if this behaviour (phubbing) was not already a problematic behaviour in the participants relationship to begin with. Therefore, although the results may have indicated that cellphone rules regarding contact with others did not impact relationship satisfaction, the measure used may not have been adequate to identify if contacting others while in the presence of a romantic partner was a concern for these participants - ultimately providing an explanation as to why this rule did not appear to have an impact on relationship satisfaction.

Overall, MICT can be a hindrance to the development of quality connection and intimacy in romantic relationships. Studies have shown that by having a mobile device present while in

the company of a romantic partner, the ability for attuned and empathic engagement is restricted. Moreover, cellular devices can pose as a distraction from the present moment; individuals are often in a state of absent presence as they are primed toward the social interactions available to them on their mobile devices. Couples' struggle to resist the lure of their cellphone notifications during face to face interactions resulting in technofence and phubbing behaviours which are causing conflict amongst romantic partner's. However, the attraction to various technological mediums (email, text message, phone call) for interpersonal communication appears to be driven, at least partially, by attachment style. Therefore, it is important that couples discuss their communication preferences with one another. One way to do so is to create rules regarding the use of technologies in their relationship that considers the unique communication and attachment needs of both partners.

The concluding chapter of this capstone aims to offer practical strategies for therapists working with couples (or individuals) who present with relationship difficulties as a result of MICT use. In addition to providing comments on the literature review, this chapter will examine some common concerns that may arise in the counselling room as a result of smart phone technologies. These concerns will be considered and addressed utilizing ideas from the Gottman Method.

Chapter 3: Discussion, Practice, Analysis & Conclusion

The aim of this capstone project is to better understand how the use of Computer Mediated Communications (CMC), by way of mobile devices, influences the capacity for presence and empathy thereby impacting relationship satisfaction amongst couples in long-term romantic relationships.

Prior to reviewing the literature, I was expecting to find evidence that Mobile Information Communication Technologies (MICT) were disrupting to couples' ability to be present for one another and therefore be a determinant of relationship dissatisfaction. However, the research findings indicate that there is a complex interplay between individual attachment history, communication style, and intimacy preferences which influence how MICT impacts romantic relationship satisfaction.

In regard to the literature reviewed, I appreciated the variation in study designs and replication that was used to conduct the research on MICT. I found that many of the studies reviewed were replications with slight variations in their methods (controlled versus field study). For example, research which examined the distracting nature of mobile devices in relationships were conducted both utilizing stranger participants in a controlled setting, and then replicated by a different research team by way of a field study (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012; Misra et al., 2014). In these studies, both groups of participants rated the presence of MICT as a hindrance to relationship presence (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012; Misra et al., 2014). By way of using a replicative study, the literature provided the reader with information as to the pervasiveness of MICT distractibility. More so, as the findings for MICT impacts were similar for both strangers and those in a casual relationship, it is likely that MICT inference is also taking place in romantic partnerships. Additionally, studies examining the impacts of CMC (texting) were also replicated examining different controls for how relationship satisfaction may be impacted. The researcher studies looked at how text messaging impacts relationship satisfaction, and then this was replicated by researchers who examined how the overall number of text messages (text share) in comparison to face to face and telephone conversations influenced satisfaction (Morey et al.,

2013; Lou, 2014). The replications of the research on MICT provided a more fulsome picture of the ways in which technologies impact intimate relationships.

Additionally, the literature reviewed was thought provoking in that it provided insights into more complex mechanisms that could explain the dissatisfaction couples are experiencing as a result of MICT use. Rather than simply attributing relationship dissatisfaction to the use of spouse's MICT, the research offered and further examined the connection between one's attachment style (anxious, secure or avoidant) and the meaning that they may be attributing to their partner's technology use as a result of their attachment style. In this way, it is not necessarily the technological device that is causing dissatisfaction in romantic relationships, but rather how it's use is being understood in relation to ones' self-schema and understanding of their relationship. These insights gained from the literature provide additional avenues that counsellors can explore (attachment history, significant relationships) with their clients in order to aid couples' who are experiencing MICT related dissatisfaction in their relationship.

The most significant limitation identified in the literature was that the research generally did not consider the partnership as a whole when conducting its examination into technology's impact on romantic relationships and instead focused on the individual. Several studies identified cellphone use as a factor in lowering relationship satisfaction (Roberts & David, 2016; McDaniel & Coyne 2016), however of the participants selected in these studies only one spouse in the relationship was considered rather than examining the impact on the partnership as a whole. Thus, the studies failed to account for the perspective of both partner's in relation to one another and how this may have impacted the results. Social construction theory contends that reality and knowledge are constructed based on interactive experiences with other people, and that the meaning individuals ascribed to their relationships (how they perceive and situate important

relationships in their lives) are derived from these social interactions (Gergen & Ness, 2016). Utilizing this theory as a framework for couples' experiences, it would be valuable for researchers to consider the impacts of CMC on the dyad, rather than solely individual experience. As previously discussed, if one member of the dyad is engaging in phubbing behavior (phone snubbing) when in the presence of their partner, while the other member is not, it is likely that relationship satisfaction would be rated differently by each member of that relationship. However, if both partners are consistently phubbing one another then the outcome for relationship satisfaction may be different. Ultimately, it is difficult to ascertain that MICT is decreasing relationship satisfaction when it is the individual, rather than the relationship, that is being surveyed.

Additionally, the interpretations (meaning) that partners are making about their spouse's phone use likely play a role in how they rate their relationship satisfaction and this information is more accurately identified by surveying the dyad. For example, in a relationship a partner may witness their spouse using social networking sites, or text messaging a third party while on a date together and this action may be upsetting to them. Thus, in this instance they are likely to rate the relationship as unsatisfying. However, their spouse may witness the partner exhibiting these same behaviours of texting and social networking during a date and not be bothered by these actions and would continue to rate the relationship as satisfactory. If surveying only the first spouse, the results would indicate that CMC is negatively impacting relationship satisfaction. However, when both partners are surveyed the results are not so straight forward indicating the possibility of other variables, such as meaning making, to be mitigating the impact of MICT in relationship satisfaction. Therefore, surveying both members of the relationship on their CMC usage is valuable as it provides a more fulsome picture of how MICT impacts relationships, and

it can lead to avenues of further research (meaning making, attachment) that may better explain the variance in relationship satisfaction.

Relationship Conflict

Despite the unpleasant feelings that often arise during conflict with ones' romantic partner, the presence of conflict in a relationship can be considered a catalyst for growth as it has the potential to be immensely productive to the overall satisfaction of romantic relationships. According to Gottman, conflict within relationships *is* inevitable and it serves a multitude of pro-social functions such as attuning the couple to dynamics that are not serving the relationship, clarifying needs and boundaries, and aiding in understanding one another as the relationship changes over time (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). In this way, relationship conflict provides couples with important information about their own and their partner's beliefs, desires, vulnerabilities and perspectives. By way of working through conflicts together, couples may achieve an increased sense of closeness (intimacy) in their relationship. However, in order to yield these beneficial effects from conflict, it is essential that couples' deal with their concerns directly and in a considerate manner (positive affect) (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Overall et al., 2009). Research has found that couples' who addressed conflict directly using positive rather than negative communication strategies experienced a greater change in their relationship dynamics which lasted over time compared to those who did not address their conflict in this manner (Overall et al., 2009).

Research has made salient the importance of positive affect during daily couple interactions as well as during times of conflict. In his research, Gottman studied couples over a fourteen-year time span to gain insight into what makes relationships successful (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). He noted that of the couples who later divorced, positive affect was absent from

their conflict interactions, whereas those who stayed together displayed a five to one ratio of positive affect during interactions (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). As such, it is the manner in which the conflict is presented, and the tendency for conflict to escalate without the presence of positive affect or repair which can lead couples to relationship dissolution. Therefore, assisting couples to recognize, understand, and manage their conflictual interactions while engaging in positive affect strategies, are important skills for counsellors working with couples experiencing conflict.

With the advent of mobile technologies, couples' in romantic relationship are tasked to navigate new challenges and potential sources of conflict in their relationships: cellphone phubbing, technoference, social media jealousy and finding a balance between relationships with the online world are only some of the unique challenges that modern day technology presents to romantic relationships. As a result of the ever-expanding digital landscape, Counsellors will be tasked with assisting couples in working through the conflicts that MICT's present. Upon review of popular psychology webpages and blogs, I have identified six common themes, or symptoms, of relationship disconnection as a result of MICT use in intimate relationships. In the following section I will review this relational symptomology and discuss strategies that counsellors can use to assist their clients (couples' and individuals) to identify the disconnections they are experiencing, to work through conflicts that technological distractions present, and ultimately regain intimate connection with their spouse. I propose these strategies as an answer to the question, how can couples be in relationship with their devices whilst still maintaining and honoring their relationship with the spouse?

Symptomology of MICT

1. Feeling neglected when partner has their phone out, even when they say they are listening to you
2. Having your partner check their phone while spending quality time together
3. You are always thinking of your phone, even when you try not to
4. Feeling hurt if your partner doesn't respond back to your text in a timely manner
5. Arguments over misinterpreted text messages
6. Feelings of jealousy when your partner is on social media or texting with another person

As indicated in Gottman's research, it is the escalation of negative affect during conflict that begins to destabilize, and over time erode intimacy and satisfaction in romantic relationships (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). During conflict, negative affect can interrupt the ability for effective communication between partners' as it increases physiological arousal in the nervous system (Gottman & Gottman, 2008), making it more difficult to respond calmly and rationally. Therefore, the things that couples say to one another during these heated moments are not always thought through, and couples may begin to respond in ways which can be detrimental to the relationship. Additionally, mild to negative affect escalation in the form of the Four Horseman (criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling and contempt) predicts relationship dissatisfaction (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). As distraction is common amongst MICT users, conflicts which arise as a result of MICT use (symptoms) may have a greater likelihood of negative affect escalation; the affected spouse will begin to escalate as they perceive their partner ignoring their attempts for connection. Thus, when working with disconnections and conflicts as a result of MICT, the strategies presented have been considered within the framework of Gottman's Goals

of therapy: (1) down regulating negative affect during conflict, and (2) up regulating positive affect outside of conflict (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). The following strategies will be focused on ways to lessen the distraction that MICT can present, improve couples' ability to communicate and understand one another's needs, all the while attempting to increasing positive and supportive interactions.

Strategy One: Recognize Bids

The ability to recognize bids and pay attention to how ones' spouse expresses their needs for connection is a vital tool to preventing conflict and disconnection which can frequently arise from cellphone distractibility. According to the Gottman Institute, bids are any attempts that a partner makes for a positive connection with their spouse (Brittle, 2015); requests for assistance, affection, non-verbal signals, or simply sharing the details of ones' day are some examples of ways bids may show up in a romantic relationship. Partners' who are able to successfully identify and respond to their spouses' bids for connection, also known as "turning towards one another" (Brittle, 2015) are creating a foundation of connection in their relationship. More so, responding to bids acknowledges a spouses' need for companionship and is essentially saying to the other person "I see you and I care about you".

Unfortunately, the distraction that mobile devices present often interrupt partner's abilities to recognize their spouses' bids for connection, as is indicated with symptomology (1). In this way, it is important that counsellors work with their clients to identify the distractions (mobile phones, text messaging, social media) and facilitate an understanding of the unique bids that each partner may express in the relationship. According to the Gottman Institute, one of the first steps towards recognizing bids in relationship is to assist the couple in identifying their unique ways of making bids (Brittle, 2015). For example, asking client's what actions,

behaviours, or communications they use to let their partner know that they are attempting to seek connection. By equipping partners with the self-recognition to identify and express what their bids look like, they will be better equipped to assist their spouse to recognize when they are making a bid; it is not reasonable to expect a partner to recognize one's bids when unsure of how you express these bids yourself. Further, once a spouse's unique bidding style has been identified, spouses' can be encouraged to present their bids to their partner in a more direct manner. For example, a spouse who is seeking affection could follow their action with "I'm making a bid for affection right now". Providing direct bids can be especially useful for couples who are in the early stages of their relationship and are just becoming familiar with each other's needs and mannerisms (Brittle, 2015). Additionally, the direct bid approach can be useful to signal to a partner who is distracted that there is an attempt for a connection being made.

Once spouses have become skilled at recognizing one another's bids, counsellors can begin to explore the natural responses that the couple has toward one another's attempts for connection to assist them to feel more connected in their relationship. Gottman's research has identified that those in long lasting satisfied relationships turned toward one another's bids 86% of the time, in comparison to those who divorced (Brittle, 2015). In order to effectively turn toward a spouse's bid, it requires not only that the bid is recognized, but also that the bid is appropriately responded to. Successfully responding to bids in most instances requires that partners display an active interest in what their spouse has said (Gottman & Gottman, 2008); engaging in conversation, asking questions or providing an empathic response are all possible ways of showing an active interest (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Counsellors can assist clients to learn to respond to bids in ways that are meaningful and cultivate connection in the relationship. In order to do so, the counsellor can assist the couple to discuss the bids that are being made, and

the responses they are receiving. The counsellor can then mine through these interactions, identifying the needs of each partner whilst providing some education on the importance of responding to bids. For example, a partner who struggles to express when they are needing help with the chores may use a subtle bid to notify their spouse that they are needing support (a sigh, frown, swearing under their breath). However, the spouse may frequently miss this bid and continue to check emails or watch television instead. In this situation, the counsellor could begin a dialogue about the bid that is being made and the importance of the spouse making a response (I'm noticing you seem upset, is there anything you need from me?). Additionally, the counsellor can use this situation to coach the afflicted partner on being more direct in their bids so that they are able to obtain the support that they need.

By facilitating the recognition of bids in a romantic partnership, counsellors are helping couples to create a foundation of positive relational engagement which they can then turn to during times of relationship distress. As Alter (2017) and many other researchers have identified, the new age technologies (mobile phones, smart devices, social media) are intrinsically addictive in their design. As technologies continue to present a distraction in relationships, it is important that couples have tools to express their needs when devices begin to interrupt the relationship connection. By way of being in tune with ones' partner's way of expressing their need for connections (bids), and being able to turn toward one another the majority of the time, partners who experience times of disconnection may be less impacted as they will be able to a) not experience an override in negative feelings as their bids are historically more often than not met and b) have the tools to express their needs when cellphones are present. Ultimately, partners' who have a history of turning towards one another's bids for connection create a foundation of trust, intimacy and connection (Ury, 2019) which will serve them during the times of relationship

disconnection. In this way, it is important for counsellors to facilitate an understand of bid recognition and turning toward one another as this can mitigate distress that cell phone distractions can afford.

Strategy Two: Soft Start-Up

The distracting nature of MICT's can increase the likelihood of conflict escalation when spouse's attempt to express their needs and set boundaries around MICT use in their relationship. Partners who are attempting to have a conversation around problematic MICT use with a spouse who is distracted by a device are presented with a challenging situation as they try to balance expressing their feelings of frustration and rejection in a way that allows them to be heard over the distraction of the device. However, in attempting to do so, the afflicted partner may escalate as a result of being ignored for a device. As such, the afflicted partner's response may be to blame, criticize or escalate the negative affect out of frustration. Moreover, expressing ones' needs can feel immensely vulnerable for some individuals, and the perception of ones' spouse being mentally and emotionally unavailable does not create an inviting atmosphere to have such a conversation. Therefore, some spouses may decide to not address the issue at all. In order to mitigate conflict escalation and assist with having relational needs met, Counsellors can provide clients with psycho-education and training on the skills of a soft start to address this challenge.

The soft start up is a technique that is applicable in assisting couples when addressing any of the relationship symptomology that presents itself as a result of MICT as it teaches more productive communication between partners. Rather than using criticism or attacking ones' partner for their perceived failures during a conflict, the soft start up technique promotes needs expression and positive affect to assist couples to work through conflict. Gottman (Lisitsa, 2013) notes that when addressing issues in a relationship, such as feelings of neglect or hurt (which

often occurs as a result of phone snubbing), couples will often point out fault at the start of the interaction. This act of placing blame creates defensiveness for the receiving partner thereby preventing them from hearing what the afflicted partner is trying to say. More so, defensiveness may further escalate the issue as the partner who is defending themselves may retaliate (“so you can be on your phone when we are out to dinner, but I can’t check mine?”) or provide non-verbal cues in reaction to the perceived accusation (eye-rolling or walking away) which can shut down the conversation. In this way, the conflict begins to escalate in a negative manner which prevents the main issue from being addressed. Counsellors can provide training with couples’ on how to use the soft start up technique when addressing MICT relationship symptomology. For example, when working with a client who is experiencing feelings of jealousy that their partner is often on social media, counsellors can coach them on addressing their concerns using the Gottman’s soft start technique.

Soft Start-up: Use I Statements, Non-Judgmental Descriptions & Appreciation

Counsellors can encourage the client to discuss their concern about their spouse’s social media use in a non-judgemental, non-blaming format. A way to do this would be to assist the client in identifying their feelings about the situation and using “I-statements” when in discussion with their spouse. The counsellor will explore the client’s feelings of jealousy (when did they first begin, when are they strongest, what is the history of this feeling) to assist the client in determining if these feelings are in relation to their partners action’s specifically, or if the feelings perhaps belong to a previous experience. Once the client and counsellor have a more fulsome understanding of the client’s feelings toward their partner’s social media use (fear of abandonment, need for affection and support, for example), the counsellor can coach the client in addressing their partner in a non-judgemental and honest fashion. Rather than using blame and

criticism (“you are always on social media” “you don’t want to spend time with me”) the client would rephrase taking ownership of their needs (“I notice that when I come over you are checking your phone often, and this has me concerned about our relationship” “I care about you and am scared that you no longer feel the same way” “I am not feeling like a priority, and would like to spend more time together away from our computers/ phones”). In this way, the client is describing the situation, and expressing their feelings and needs in a way that is neither accusing nor is judgemental of their partner’s phone use.

Moreover, despite feeling hurt that their partner has not been attentive to their relationship, it is important that the client continue to express positive affect when addressing the issue at hand. Positive affect, in this instance, would be reminding their spouse how much they are cared for by them even though there is a conflict. By including expressions of positive affect during conflict discussions the tone of the conversation will be softened, and these expressions will help to maintain an emotional connection between partners (Lisitsa, 2013). Furthermore, by way of assisting clients to communicate their continued care for their partner during times of conflict, client’s will have a greater likelihood of having their point of view heard and understood; these affectionate expressions serve as a reminder to the spouse that although there is conflict, they are in a safe and loving relationship. Therefore, the spouse’s defenses will be lessened, enabling them to hear their partner’s concerns and hopefully come to a resolution together.

However, if attempting to communicate needs when ones’ partner is not able to be present and focus on the discussion in the moment as their device is present, encourage the spouse who needs to address these issues to hold this conversation at a time when there will be no devices present (see section on scheduling device free time). Despite not being able to have

the discussion within their preferred timeframe, counsellors can encourage the afflicted spouse to journal their thoughts feelings rather than pushing them aside. Journaling can include prompts such as identifying what for them happens when their partner is checking their device during allocated quality time together. By way of encouraging a journaling activity, the afflicted client can gain a better understanding of the feelings which arise (rejection, anger, unappreciated, abandonment) and be able to verbalize them in a constructive way that enables them to express their needs. From there, the counsellor can assist in practicing addressing these issues using “I” statements, rather than passing blame. For example, the statement “you are always on your phone and ignoring me” could be rephrased as “I don’t feel important to you right now and I would like to spend more time with you device free”.

Strategy Three: Mindfulness

The distracting nature of MICT impacts the ability to be present in romantic relationships, as well as present for ones’ own emotional landscape (feelings, thoughts, emotions). This challenge of presence can result in conflict amongst couples as missed bids for connections, and reactive responding rather than listening / hearing becomes more habitual. Further, the focused attention on technology while in the presence of one’s partner sends off the message that technology is valued over intimate connection. Additionally, evidence has shown that technologies are being relied on as a way to distract from uncomfortable feelings (Nandini & Sruti Lall, 2019), which if continual, can result in a lack of self-awareness of thoughts, feelings and emotions. When there is a lack of awareness of the thoughts and feelings that often drive behaviour, it can be especially challenging for couples to manage their urge to turn toward technology for relief. As such, it is not uncommon for individuals who frequently use technologies to be distracted by thoughts of their mobile technologies even while spending time

with their romantic partner. This symptom of MICT can make connection especially challenging for romantic partners.

Further, the lack of social cues (voice tone, eye contact, body language) when using computer mediated communication (CMC) can create misunderstandings between spouses who frequently rely on CMC's as a way to stay in touch. The uncertainty that arises from an unanswered message can stimulate attachment-based insecurities, and trigger obsessive thinking, anxiety, rumination and feelings of hurt for the afflicted partner. Mindfulness strategies have been found to be effective in dealing with problematic technology use (Nandini & Sruti Lall, 2019; Lan et al., 2018), and assist in calming the mind and reducing the anxiety-based stress that technological communications can create (Apaolaza et al., 2019). Therefore, counsellors working with couples experiencing symptoms of MICT disconnection and or anxiety may want to consider implementing mindfulness techniques such as awareness of breath, thoughts and emotions, into their practice.

Awareness

By way of assisting clients to become aware of their thoughts, feelings and emotions, counsellors are equipping clients with the ability to choose their responses rather than reacting to their urges. For clients who are new to mindfulness, counsellors can begin by teaching breath awareness (Appendix A). This exercise helps clients become aware of their rhythm of breathing, and how the breath can be used as a tool to decrease tension and stress in the body. Counsellors will encourage clients to focus on the feeling of their breath naturally moving in and out of the body and will remind them to bring their focus back to the breath each time the mind begins to wander. The breath can yield information as to how one is feeling and assist in regulating emotions (Doll et al., 2016); by assisting clients to practice mindful breathing, clients will

become more attuned to their body and their emotional state (fast shallow breathing can be an indication of stress, whereas slow deep breaths signal relaxation). Cultivating an awareness of breathing is a basic mindfulness technique that counsellors can have in their toolkit when working with individuals and couples experiencing symptoms of heightened anxiety due to technology overuse.

Once the awareness of breath has been successfully grasped by the client(s), counsellors can move on to mindfulness of thoughts. Similar to the awareness of breath technique, counsellors can encourage the client to become attuned with their breathing with the intention of shifting focus to ones' thoughts once settled (Mindfulness Exercises, 2019). In this technique, the goal is to teach clients how to become aware of their thought processes without automatically attaching or believing that everything they think is the truth (Mindfulness Techniques, 2019). In this practice, counsellors will work with clients to observe their thoughts without delving into their content or resisting what is naturally coming up for them. Throughout this process it is important to remind the client that it is normal to get lost in ones' thoughts and gently encourage them to return to the position of the observer. Further, as some thoughts can bring forth strong emotions and be distressing in nature it is paramount to inform the client that they can stop the exercise if needed and return to focusing on their breath (Mindfulness Techniques, 2019). The ability to be aware of ones' thoughts may be especially useful in moments of technology triggered anxieties.

Turning Toward Emotions

The medium of computer mediated communications can be especially challenging for some client's in relationship as it lacks cues which are essential to effective communication. As such increased anxieties over miscommunication and delayed responses are common,

Mindfulness techniques that encourage attuning to and letting go of difficult feelings and emotions can be useful for client's struggling in this regard.

When a difficult feeling or emotion arises, such as the feeling of rejection when ones' partner has ignored their text message, counsellors can teach client's how to work through these feelings using mindfulness of emotional awareness (Appendix B). Beginning with having the client bring an awareness to their breath (see awareness techniques), counsellors will encourage clients to become attuned to their feeling about the incident and identify where the feeling lives in the body, as well as how it feels (tightness, pressure, warm, tingling sensation) (cite mindful techniques). Additionally, the counsellor can ask the client to notice any stories that they have attached to the feeling and to let go of this narrative. In doing so, encourage the client to maintain their attention to the physiological sensations that arise out of their emotional response (Sanger, 2020) and to stick with it until the emotion dissipates. The natural reaction of the client may be to turn away from this feeling as it is unpleasant, therefore it is important for the counsellor to provide psycho-education on emotional awareness prior to beginning this exercise. Psycho-education may entail informing the client that emotions may feel more intense when first attended too and that allowing oneself to sit with these sensations in the body will enable them to be released (Mindfulness Exercises, 2016). However, it is of utmost importance that counsellors remind the client that the client is in control of their experience, and if the emotions ever become too distressing or too intense they are welcome to pull back and refocus on to their breathing. Educating clients on what they can expect prior to using this exercise and gaining consent to do so is an ethical necessity when working with emotional awareness techniques; the counsellor cannot know the intensity of feelings that may arise for the client, and those clients who have a

history of trauma may require additional skills (resourcing, self-soothing) prior to attempting emotional awareness techniques.

Strategy Four: Technology Usage Rules

Technological devices, especially mobile phones, commonly interfere in romantic couples' time spent together. By way of defining boundaries and developing mutually agreed upon terms of acceptable technology use in relationship, couples' may be able to prevent cellphone distracting situations (phubbing and technoference) from arising thereby mitigating the hurt feelings and tensions that arise as a result. Counsellors can assist couples in this endeavour by encouraging the development of a mutually agreed upon list of rules for technology that are unique and meaningful to the couple.

Prior to developing this list, the counsellor would first want to explore the areas that cellphone (or technology) interferences are most prevalent or disruptive in the couples' life. In order to do this, the counsellor could conduct an unstructured interview of the relational dynamics, or they could implement a technological interference questionnaire, such as the Electronic Distraction Quiz (Appendix C). By way of using a questionnaire format, it can provide useful information for how each partner is really feeling about the use of technology in the relationship and provide a starting point for an open dialogue between the couple. Areas that have been identified as mutually problematic can be strategized between the couple with the assistance of the counsellor, however instances where the partner's do not agree may require additional support. An example of this could be where one spouse is unable to disconnect their cellphone due to work commitments. In these instances, compromises will need to be identified and the counsellor can assist with this; some ideas could include setting a specific call list so that only necessary calls are able to come through (Golem, 2018), and scheduling work calls where

possible rather than having to attend to them as they arise throughout the course of the day with ones' partner.

Scheduling device free time is one method that couples can use to reconnect, and it can be especially useful if timed in such a way that allows couples to have their individual needs for connection met. With the assistance of the counsellor, couples can explore and set aside mutually agreed upon timeframes throughout the day that are designated as device free. These timeframes can be coordinated by the couple in such a way that allows them to hold important discussions and have time for reconnection. For example, a wife who seeks to connect with her husband upon arriving home after work and is often disappointed and feels neglected when finding her husband is playing games on his phone, thus ignoring her when she tries to tell him about her day. In this situation, the counsellor may want to explore the needs of both the husband and wife when they arrive home after their days of work. As the husband may require disconnection and downtime to re-energize himself, his using his phone may be a strategy for relaxation. Therefore, the counsellor can explore compromises with the couple (Gottman & Gottman, 2008) in order to develop a timeframe that they could mutually agree upon as device free so that they are able to reconnect and discuss their day. In this way, the counsellor assists the couple to develop an understanding of one another's needs and facilitates communication and rules that will work for the couple.

Additionally, by allowing device free time together couples can make room for moments of unstructured connection which are immensely beneficial toward facilitating positive affect in their relationship. Unstructured moments, or periods of time that are not dedicated to completing a specific task, "hold the most potential for building closeness and a sense of connection" (Trotter, 2018). It is in these moments that couples are free from the distractions of their devices

and daily to do lists, and as such are able to be fully present for one another. These moments of time spent together can yield deeper understanding of one another, as well as empathy and gratitude all of which facilitate positive emotions. Moreover, these moments can provide feelings of security and deeper connection. As such, counsellors can encourage the practice of moments of unstructured connection. One way to do this would be to have the couple sit with one another, face to face, in a place where they will not be interrupted (having left cellular devices either at home or in another room) and have a conversation. The counsellor would encourage the couple to make a mental note of how this interaction may feel in comparison to times when their devices are present, and also take note of the things that they are noticing about their partner (expressions of feeling, body language), (Golem, 2018) and ask that the couple discuss these recognitions in their next session. By encouraging couples to schedule device free unstructured time, counsellors are helping clients set aside time to nurture their relationship.

In addition to setting boundaries and scheduling device free time, discussing rules about the ways that the couple will use cellphones with one another is beneficial. Cellphone rules for how the phone is used within ones' romantic relationship has been found to increase relationship satisfaction when the spouses are on the same page (Miller-Ott et al.,). Conflict over common cellphone related issues, such as feeling hurt when one's partner does not respond back in a "timely" manner, and text message interpretations can be mitigated by having rules in place. For example, in the midst of a busy day, partner's often text message one another to check in on one another. Short and direct messages ("ok, "fine") can be misinterpreted as an indication that a partner is not okay, thus increasing their spouses' concern and even relational anxiety. However, the reasoning for the short message could be due to the fact that the other partner is busy and does not have time to text. In this instance, the counsellor could help the couple create a

cellphone rule to use when one does not have time to message back. One such rule could be sending a specific emoji that indicates that they are busy, or simply texting back “I’m busy but I will call you later”. Alternatively, for some partner’s, due to the demands of their workday, it may make more sense for the cellphone rule to be that any text messages received will only be responded to during work breaks, and if the situation is urgent to call the work line. By way of having specific rules that partners can fall back on to understand how to best use text messaging communications during the day, the anxieties regarding unresponsiveness can be lessened. Additionally, it is important for partners to recognize that each individual has their own preferred manner of communicating (telephone, face to face, text message). Therefore, counsellors may be able to alleviate anxieties and tensions that can arise from communication mismatches with technology use in couples by way of encouraging couples to have open discussions about their perceptions and comfort with text messaging.

Strategy Five: Process Regrettable Incidents

As couples are attempting to make changes with their use of technology in relationship, it is likely that slip ups are going to occur; spouses may pick up their phone during scheduled quality time, bids for connection may be missed, and a text message conversation may get misinterpreted. In this way, it is important for counsellors to provide the couple with a foundation of skills that they can use to process these regrettable incidents when they do occur. According to Gottman, the ability to process conflicts, whether or technology us or any other issue, is an essential component of maintaining a happy and healthy relationship (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). The Gottman Method of couples’ therapy provides a useful guide for counsellors working with couples to process conflicts which are applicable to couples experiencing symptoms of MICT overuse in their relationship.

A regrettable incident, such as ignoring one's partner to answer an important personal call while their partner was attempting to discuss exciting news about their day, can result in the spouse who is holding the exciting news feeling ignored, rejected and unsupported. Further, incidents of missed bids for connection, such as in the example provided, that occur frequently can grow to resentments and contempt if they are not dealt with effectively; long standing resentment hinders the ability for understanding and resolution (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). According to Gottman, the first step toward assisting couples to work through these kinds of conflicts is having both partners acknowledge that an incident occurred, and that each partner has their own subjective reality of what took place (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Additionally, the counsellor will need to ensure that both parties are able to talk about the incident without being physiologically triggered back into the argument (see Mindfulness section for strategies used in this instance). Once the presence of subjective realities has been recognized, the counsellor can assist the couple in an open dialogue of the incident. The following example will walk through processing the regrettable incident of cellphone phubbing.

Discussion of Feelings and Needs

The counsellor will encourage the couple to discuss how the conflict arising from the cellphone interruption has made one another feel, what their reality of the incident was, and what they need. In this conversation, the counsellor will take the stance of the facilitator, using empathy to help clarify feelings and misunderstandings (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). It is important to allow one member of the couple to speak first and share their feelings on the incident rather than hold an open conversation. By allowing each member their turn to speak uninterrupted, it ensures that they are able to fully explain their position without having their partner's thoughts throw them off track. Additionally, it allows the other partner the space to

hear and absorb their spouses point of view as they are freed from the expectation of coming up with a response. The counsellor can encourage the afflicted partner to begin the conversation in the format of the soft start technique. For example, having the afflicted partner identify their feelings and needs in the form of “I” statements rather than blaming. In this instance, the afflicted partner may describe feelings of hurt, dejection and feeling as though they were unimportant to their partner when they chose to interrupt the conversation by taking a personal call. As such, the afflicted partner may identify needs of feeling heard, and respected.

Additionally, one of the needs identified could be for quality time after work for the partners to reconnect with one another. In a similar fashion, the other partner would also describe their feelings and needs in this situation; feeling misunderstood, pressured to take the call. In this instance they may identify the need for some personal time upon arriving home so that they can unwind and be more present for the relationship.

Subjective Realities

Once the needs and feelings have been identified, it is important that the partner’s share their subjective realities of the conflict experience. As Gottman describes, conflict often stems from “mismatches in perception and need in everyday interaction that very rapidly lead to misunderstanding” (Gottman & Gottman, 2008, p. 144). By way of encouraging the couple to discuss their experience of the conflict, insights into one another’s world view (perspective) can be realized which can facilitate understanding between the couple. For example, although the afflicted partner viewed their spouse’s cellphone interruption as a indication that the happenings of their day and subsequent conversation was not important, the partner on the phone may have been eagerly awaiting a call from the hospital for test results, which happened to come through as their partner was beginning to discuss the happenings of their day. In this way, the partner

who picked up the phone had not intended to upset their partner but was in fact preoccupied with a very important personal matter. Additionally, they may be holding onto some hurt feelings as they may have perceived their partner's inquiring as to their health status as hurtful and indicating that they are also not cared for. As partner's are discussing their subjective realities of the conflict, it is important that the counsellor facilitate the conversation in a manner that allows both partner's a chance to share their perspective without interruption. The sharing of subjective realities can provide immense clarification and healing for partner's as they begin to see the conflict through the eyes of their partner.

Validating Partner's Reality

As partner's are sharing their feelings, needs and subjective realities, it is important that the counsellor helps the clients to validate their partner's reality of the situation. During a relational conflict, the spouses may fall into the unhealthy pattern of trying to win the argument (Benson, 2017). In these interactions, couples' fail to acknowledge that both perspectives are valid which typically results in further hurt, disconnection and conflict. By way of validating one another's reality, partners are essentially putting their ego's aside and acknowledging each other's feelings and experiences; putting aside the need to be right and recognizing that they are a team. One way for clients to do this is by verbalizing the experience of their partner and describing it back to them. Counsellors can facilitate this process by teaching the couple skills of attentiveness, active listening and empathic reflection (Bayne & Jangha, 2016) which they can then use when providing validation to their partner. Additionally, guiding couples in using the speaker and listener technique (Gottman & Gottman, 2008) can be effective in helping the couple practice their attentiveness and listening skills while their partner is describing their experience. In this instance, the afflicted partner may describe their partner's experience as

worrisome and highly stressful and recognizing that they could not have been fully present for their spouse in that moment. Alternatively, the partner who picked up the call may verbalize their understanding of their partners' experience as feeling really hurt and disrespected by having someone take a call while they were trying to share something exciting and meaningful to them.

Ownership of one's Role in the Conflict & Moving Forward

Further to validating one another's subjective realities of the conflict, the counsellor will assist the client's in taking ownership of their role in the conflict and create a plan to move forward. This step toward processing regrettable incidents is unlikely to be effective until the previous steps (discussions of feelings, needs, subjective realities and validations) have been completed as they work to soften the experience of the conflict and can bring the couple closer together emotionally and mentally (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). As such, counsellors should be mindful of not rushing through the previous steps but rather be aware of how the couple is engaging and spend more time exploring their experiences where needed. The roles in conflict are owned by having partners acknowledge how their actions contributed to the conflict, perhaps even offer an apologetic statement if warranted, and beginning a discussion of ways to move forward. For example, the afflicted partner may own their disregard for their partner's health concern while their spouse acknowledges that picking up a call during a conversation is rude and apologize for doing so. The couple would then look toward ways that they could prevent this type of conflict from happening again. One way that the counsellor can assist in developing plans for moving forward is by helping the couple recognize the miscommunications that may have contributed to their conflict and identifying ways to minimize these (see cellphone usage rules section). In this instance, the couple may want to consider further discussing what each person needs at the end of a work day (time together versus time apart) and compromise what that

would look like going forward in their relationship. Additionally, practicing regular communications utilizing the speaker listener technique (Gottman & Gottman, 2008) could be effective for enhancing their understanding of one another's needs going forward.

The ability to process regrettable incidents is a foundational relationship skill that aids in conflict resolution, overall relationship satisfaction and is applicable to addressing issues that arise from MICT. The format for processing regrettable incidents moves the couple through stages that gradually enable the couple to soften toward one another and become more adept at understanding each other's perspectives. Further, as much of the conflict arising from the use of MICT is a result of misinterpretations of the meaning behind ones' use of technology, the technique of processing regrettable incidents is fitting as it delves into a discussion of each spouse's reality (feelings, needs, desires, meaning) in order to sort out incident. More so, this is a skill that counsellors are able to practice with the client's in session, and coach them to work on gradually at home in between sessions. In this way, the client's will have multiple opportunities to refine their regrettable incident skills and will eventually become less reliant on the counsellor to guide during a conflict.

Meaning Making

While working with clients who are experiencing conflict as a result of MICT, it is important to remember that it is often the meaning that has been attached to the behaviour that determines ones' reactions and subsequent feelings. The research has shown that individual history (trauma, attachment) as well as perceptions of ones' current relationship (social construction) work to create the lens through which partner's experience their present relationship (Collins & Read, 1990). In this way, partners have come to recognize a particular reality and understanding of their spouse and their relationship. Therefore, in addition to

providing strategies for couples to combat conflicts facilitated by MICT, it is imperative that counsellors also explore the deeper meanings that the couple has attributed to their partner's behaviour. By way of assisting partner's to understand one another's perceptions of the situation, and the underlying meaning they have attributed to their partner's behaviour in the moment of conflict, the counsellor facilitates empathy and communication between partners to help resolve tensions. Further, these discussions of perceptions of the conflict (the meaning behind the action) facilitates what Gottman refers to as Shared Meaning which is one of the building blocks to forming satisfied romantic relationships (Gottman & Gottman, 2008).

Other-Soothing and Repair of Attachment Wounds

The skills afforded to couples as a result of Gottman's strategies for communication and processing conflicts set forth the foundation for the repair of attachment wounds. Research by Greenberg, Ford, Alden and Johnson (1993) has identified that when disclosures of a partner's feelings and needs are met by a spouse who is attuned, accepting and responsive, a restructuring of the couples' emotional bond takes place. Further, by way of assisting couples to validate and soothe one another's expression of attachment based fears and needs (fears of abandonment and needs for closeness and security) early attachment wounds can begin to heal (Goldman & Greenberg, 2010). The strategies offered for working with couples experiencing MICT conflicts provide clients with the foundational skills required to begin the process of addressing and healing these attachment wounds. For example, the Soft Start technique coaches the couple on utilizing "I-Statements" where they learn to identify their needs and express them to their partner. Also, the practice of "Processing Regrettable Incidents" equips the couple with the skills of active listening and validation which are used to demonstrate understanding and empathy for one another's feelings. In this way, the strategies provided by Gottman equip couples with skills

that, with regular implementation, provide the necessary “other-soothing” required to reconcile attachment-based wounds that are often present within MICT related conflicts. Additional skills from Gottman, such as the “Speaker and Listener” technique may also be a useful technique to assist couples in their ability to express, receive and make space for one another’s feelings (Gottman & Gottman, 2008).

Conclusion

MICT’s are simultaneously a blessing and a hindrance to romantic relationships. Technology affords a multitude of ways for couples to organize and maintain their relational lives and stay in touch with one another. However, without adequate communication about technology use and boundaries within the relationship, the use of MICT can result in hurt feelings, disconnection and increased conflict between partners. Counsellors working with clients should be aware of the symptoms of problematic MICT use in relationships: preoccupation with technology, technofence and phubbing behaviours, anxiety and rumination regarding CMC and disconnection amongst the couple. When encountering these symptoms, counsellors can implore practical strategies to help counteract these symptoms. By way of incorporating the Gottman’s research of relationship master’s and disasters, the following strategies for dealing with MICT symptomology have been identified: Recognizing Bids, Soft Start, Mindfulness, Technology Usage Rules and Processing Regrettable Incidents. These are practical strategies that have been designed for counsellors to use as a guide toward assisting clients who present with relationship distress in relation to technologies. By way of implementing these strategies, counsellors can help their clients navigate the various stressors that arise from MICT whilst encouraging them to maintain positive affect and connection with one another.

Strengths and Limitations

There are several strengths to the above proposed practice for working with couples undergoing relational distress as a result of MICT overuse. Firstly, the strategies described from Gottman Couples Therapy are appropriate for use with couples regardless of their sexual orientation; heteronormative (bi-sexual, pan-sexual, homo-sexual) and heterosexual relationships would find benefit as Gottman's strategies educate and encourage couples to address conflict in a manner which encompasses respectful communication, empathy and respect (positive affect). Furthermore, the conflicts which arise from MICT can be persistent and extends to all configurations of romantic relationships. The Gottman Method is appropriate in this instance as it recognizes the reoccurrence of conflict and reframes it as an opportunity for relationship growth (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Rather than attempting to eradicate relationship conflict, the Gottman Method focuses on providing strategies that couples can use to address conflict in a direct, honest, and loving way. In this way, the strategies discussed for approaching problematic MICT use is applicable to intimate relationships generally as the aim is to improve the connection between the couple so that they may move through conflicts more effectively.

Secondly, the Gottman approach provides a set of skills that are transferrable to life outside of the counselling session. There is a significant monetary cost involved for regular sessions with a couple's therapist. As such, it is advantageous for the couple to be provided with skills that are practical and can be incorporated into their day to day communications. Many of the strategies discussed for working through MICT related conflict in the therapy space can also be adapted by couples to address their day to day conflicts. More so, with adequate practice, Gottman's strategies can form the foundation for how couples engage in conflict resolution outside of the counselling session more generally. For example, the soft start method and

strategies for processing regrettable incidents contain sets of skills that are teachable and can be generalized to addressing most disagreements between couples. Counsellors can work with clients to hone the basics of these skills while in session (I-statements, active listening skills, identification and expression of feeling and needs) and encourage the couple to practice them within their conversations at home. In this way, the financial burden to client's will be minimized as they will be able to use these skills as needed rather than making an appointment each time a conflict occurs. Furthermore, these strategies can be empowering for clients as they will be able to rely on their learnt skills to work through conflicts together. Ultimately, the Gottman Method provides clients with a skill-set for communicating and working through conflict in a manner which promotes positive interactions and thus can be relied upon whenever challenges are occurring within the relationship.

A limitation to the suggested strategies for working with MICT symptomology is that it requires that the couple feels safe both within themselves and in their relationship. The Gottman method requires that the couple collaborate and express themselves to one another (emotions, vulnerabilities, thoughts and feelings), and this level of expression may not be available if the conflict is arising from an underlying trauma response. Within a relationship, there are certain behaviours that can trigger a greater conflictual response than others and the sources of these conflicts are not always within conscious awareness. In this way, it is possible that some of the conflict that couples are experiencing are arising from an unresolved trauma response. For example, an individual may become increasingly anxious and upset when their partner is using their mobile device while they are together and each time they try to express their discomfort to their partner they become emotionally overwhelmed. This inability to adequately express oneself results in their spouse not understanding the issue and becoming frustrated. In this scenario, the

technology afflicted partner is not able to express themselves effectively, therefore Gottman's strategies for working through conflict (soft start, I-statements, expressions of affections) would not be effective. The counsellor should proceed cautiously on any attempts to facilitate self-expression in this instance as this may overwhelm the client. In this example, the source of the distress is unknown, and the struggling partner has not yet learnt tools to be able to effectively regulate their nervous system, therefore continuing to push for expression may be harmful. Thus, the Gottman method would not be effective as the sole strategy with this couple. Rather, individual sessions should be considered in order to provide the afflicted partner with trauma processing and emotional/ nervous system regulation skills prior to attempting Gottman strategies with the couple. The Gottman method strategies can be effective to assist couples to address conflict, however, these strategies are limited in that they require both members of the dyad to be able to be present and grounded for dialogue to be effective – and this may not be possible for those client's experiencing nervous system activation as a result of trauma.

Although the strategies provided in this paper are designed to address MICT derived conflict, their usefulness is limited in that these strategies do not consider the impacts of behavioural addiction(s) to technology in romantic relationships. There is divergence in the literature regarding the legitimacy of mobile phone use and addiction in comparison to defined behavioural addictions such as gambling and internet gaming disorder (Billieux, Maurage, Lopez-Fernandez, Kuss & Griffiths, 2015). However, as Adler (2017) argues, the mechanisms for technology addiction (inclusive of mobile phones') are similar to those which make substance use addictive; the same neural pathways implicated in substance use disorders are also activated when using technologies that provide positive feedback (text message or Instagram likes). Further, technology can serve as a way to ease the discomfort of psychological distress (Adler,

2017). Thus, MICT use can become increasingly problematic, and develop into an addiction when it provides a reward (dopamine release) and is adopted as a coping skill to alleviate emotional discomfort. The strategies provided in this paper were designed to facilitate conflict resolution and meaningful connection between partners experiencing problematic MICT.

However, in the instance where ones' MICT use has become significantly problematic and they (or their spouse) is exhibiting signs of addiction such as preoccupation, impaired control, social impairment, risky behaviour, conflict and relapse (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), these strategies will not be effective. Further, the use of these strategies without first addressing the addiction may result in greater disconnection between the couple as discouragement and frustration with the lack of change builds. In these instances, it would be prudent for counsellors to consider individual therapy options to address the underlying mechanics of addiction prior to implementing Gottman's strategies with the couple.

Final Thoughts

As with any behaviour, the use of MICT falls along a continuum of useful to harmful. While MICT can aid in the facilitation of our connections with loved ones, and provide an avenue to maintain pre-existing relationships, such as with our romantic partners, this same technology can disconnect us from our self, and interrupt our ability for meaningful present moment connections with other important people in our lives. By way of writing this capstone, I hoped to achieve a more fulsome understanding of why MICT behaviour often escalates toward being harmful, and if there were actions that could be taken to counteract its influence. I chose to focus this paper on romantic relationships in particular, as recognition to my relationship with my fiancé and our commitment to bettering our understanding of one another. We have personally experienced many of the symptomologies of problematic MICT use in our

relationship and were stumped on how to effectively address them. The process of writing this paper has given me a wealth of knowledge into MICT, the psychological determinants effecting its use, and skills to begin to address the disconnection that it can cause – which I have been able to share with my partner. Although my fiancé and I are far from experts at simultaneously being in relationship with one another and with technology, I believe the experiences we have had utilizing the strategies for MICT conflict will be of benefit to my professional practice. I aim to bring this knowledge, along with my compassion into my future work with clients who are struggling with the impacts of MICT in their relationships

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Appendix A

Breath Awareness Meditation

Date / Time

So far today, have you brought kind awareness to your:

Thoughts? Heart? Body? None of the Above

PURPOSE/EFFECTS

Stress is an extremely unhealthy condition. It causes the body to release the chemical cortisol, which has been shown to reduce brain and organ function, among many other dangerous effects. Modern society inadvertently encourages a state of almost continuous stress in people.

This is a meditation that encourages physical and mental relaxation, which can greatly reduce the effects of stress on the body and mind.

METHOD

Summary

Sit still and pay close attention to your breathing process.

Long Version

- Take a reposed, seated posture. Your back should be straight and your body as relaxed as possible.
- Close your eyes, and bring your attention to your breathing process. Simply notice you are breathing. Do not attempt to change your breath in any way. Breathe simply and normally.
- Try to notice both the in breath and the out breath; the inhale and the exhale. "Notice" means to actually feel the breathing in your body with your body. It is not necessary to visualize your breathing or to think about it in any way except to notice it with your somatic awareness.
- Each time your attention wanders from the act of breathing, return it to noticing the breath. Do this gently and without judgment.
- Remember to really feel into the act of breathing.

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Breath Awareness Meditation

- If you want to go more deeply into this, concentrate on each area of breathing in turn. Here is an example sequence:
 1. Notice how the air feels moving through your nostrils on both the in breath and the out breath.
 2. Notice how the air feels moving through your mouth and throat. You may feel a sort of slightly raspy or ragged feeling as the air moves through your throat. This is normal and also something to feel into.
 3. Notice how the air feels as it fills and empties your chest cavity. Feel how your rib cage rises slowly with each in breath, and gently deflates with each out breath.
 4. Notice how your back expands and contracts with each breath. Actually feel it shifting and changing as you breath.
 5. Notice how the belly expands outward with each in breath and pulls inward with each in breath. Allow your attention to fully enter the body sensation of the belly moving with each breath.
 6. Now allow your attention to cover your entire body at once as you breath in and out. Closely notice all the sensations of the body as it breathes.
- Repeat this sequence over and over, giving each step your full attention as you do it.
- Suggested time is at least 10 minutes. Thirty minutes is better, if you are capable of it.

HISTORY

Breath awareness is probably the oldest meditation technique, and is certainly the most universally known. It can be found, for example, in the [Anapanasati Sutta](#), a scripture which summarizes the Buddha's teaching on breath awareness meditation. Anapanasati means "breath awareness meditation in Pali. The Buddha had learned the basic technique from his own teachers, which means that it existed at least as far back as 500 BCE, although it was probably already ancient at the time.

[Here is a page with an extensive history of breath awareness meditation, particularly in Buddhism.](#)

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Appendix B

Emotional Awareness Meditation

Long Version

1. Settle into a comfortable meditation posture.
2. Breathing normally, bring your attention to your emotions. Notice if you are feeling any emotions, no matter how faintly. It is not necessary to know precisely which emotion you are having, or why you are having it. Just knowing that you are feeling something emotional is enough. Guessing is OK.
3. Once you detect an emotion, see if you can find its expression in your body. Maybe there is a feeling of tension, gripping, tightening, burning, twisting, throbbing, pressure, lightness, openness, etc.
4. If you like, you can mentally make the label “feel” when you detect a body sensation of emotion. Other labels are possible [“emotion” for example].
5. Each time you detect an emotional body sensation, try to actually feel the sensation in your body, as completely as possible. Feel it through and through.
6. Completely let go of any ideas you have about the emotion, or self talk you might have about why the emotion is arising. Return to the body sensation of the emotion.
7. Continue contacting these emotional body sensations for as long as you wish.

HISTORY

Meditating on emotions is a traditional part of Vipassana practice in Buddhism. It is, for example, one of the four main techniques covered in the Vissudhimagga (The Path to Purity), an important Buddhist text.

The version presented here is a summary of a practice given by American Buddhist teacher Shinzen Young.

NOTES

- At first, practicing this meditation may make it seem as if the emotions are getting bigger. If they are negative emotions, this may seem overwhelming for a while. This is natural. It is occurring not because the emotions are actually getting bigger, but for two interesting reasons. The first is because we are no longer suppressing them. We are allowing them to actually express themselves fully. The second is because we are observing them [actually feeling them] very closely. Just

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Emotional Awareness Meditation

as a microscope makes small things look bigger, the "microscope" of attention makes the emotional body sensations seem larger than they really are.

- The good news here is that as the emotions express themselves freely in the body, they are being processed. Usually this means that they will pass much more quickly.
- If we are feeling a positive emotion in this way, it may pass quickly, but we will also derive much more satisfaction from it, because our experience of it is so rich and complete.
- If we are feeling a negative emotion in this way, we will experience much less suffering from it, because we are not resisting and suppressing it.

thank you for your mindfulness practice

May I continue to look deeply into
my mind, my heart and body.

May I see things and meet things
AS THEY ARE

and may this clear and sustained knowing free me
**FOR THE SAKE OF
ALL BEINGS.**

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Appendix C

Quiz

Electronic Distractions

LET'S ADDRESS one common solvable topic: high-tech distractions. To get a sense of whether this is an issue in your relationship and requires some attention, take this quiz:

Are they an issue for you?

- 1** I worry that my partner spends too much time attending to email or other online tasks.
 Rarely At times Usually Often
- 2** Often when I want to talk to my partner, he or she is busy texting or on the web.
 Rarely At times Usually Often
- 3** Because of digital distractions, I find it hard to feel like I come first to my partner.
 Rarely At times Usually Often
- 4** I feel that my partner wants to zone out for far too much with TV or digital media.
 Rarely At times Usually Often
- 5** It hurts me when I come into a room and my partner hardly notices me because he or she is immersed in social media.
 Rarely At times Usually Often
- 6** I feel that because of electronic media my partner isn't really fully available to me.
 Rarely At times Usually Often
- 7** Digital media seem to burn up whatever time there is for the two of us.
 Rarely At times Usually Often
- 8** My partner is too distracted by all of the electronic options and social media to be able to be fully present with me.
 Rarely At times Usually Often
- 9** Attention to social media or other such distractions is a real issue between us.
 Rarely At times Usually Often
- 10** Sometimes I would like to come first in my partner's attention rather than tech.
 Rarely At times Usually Often

If electronic distractions sometimes create a problem for either of you in your relationship, discuss how you would like the role of electronics to be different.

Be sure to use the following **four steps**: (1) Soften your start-up, (2) Make and receive repair attempts, (3) Soothe yourself and each other, and (4) Compromise (use the exercise: Finding Common Ground: Compromise Circles).