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Lost in man space

A love of logging on can damage your love life, says psychotherapist Naomi Shragai

Laura is confronted by a desperate paradox: she is married, but extremely lonely. Her husband Nick is not having an affair, nor is he working long hours. He simply spends hours a day on the computer.

Laura and Nick are a professional couple from Hertfordshire who have lived together for six years. "The beginning of our relationship was absolutely fantastic," says Laura. "We spent most of our time at my house. We did everything together and talked all through the night; we were like one person." Nick agrees: "When we first met, it was completely magical." Things changed when Nick discovered the joys of the computer. His attention shifted from the relationship and household interests, and he became absorbed in the machine.

This scenario is all too familiar to me and to colleagues working as relationship counsellors. Computers offer a perfect retreat from the complex demands of married life. Unlike marriage, a computer comes with a manual and is much more predictable than women. This was Nick's first serious relationship (Laura, not the Apple Mac), and he didn't seem to have the equipment to cope. He found that he was losing himself in the relationship. Spending time on the computer helped him to connect with himself.

This solution simply led to more problems as Laura started to feel rejected. The computer, in turn, offered him a retreat from Laura's disappointment in him. By now the computer was becoming a solution to more problems; it could improve his mood, provide endless conversations, and protect him from feeling a failure.

Nick is an extreme example of how men have traditionally retreated into solitary pursuits, such as fishing, trainspotting, or the stereotype of finding a haven in the garden shed. Often this is a refuge from the demands and difficulties of family life. These are all examples of what I call "man space". And nowadays computers have become the new shed, the ultimate man space. The only advance I can see here is that the PC doesn't need creosoting every three years. When they came to see me for psychotherapy, they rather predictably disagreed about the amount of time that Nick spends on the computer. According to Nick, it is between 15 minutes to several hours a day: playing poker, doing his accounts, "burning" CDs and films, or surfing the net.

Laura complains that the situation is more serious. "There are many nights when Nick says he's coming to bed around 11pm but arrives in the early hours of the morning," she says. "I have to beg and plead [for him to leave the computer], and he still doesn't respond," she says. Her pleas are simply heard as criticism by Nick, which drives him straight back to the machine. Not only do they disagree on the time spent, but also on how serious the problem is. For Laura, it is the focus of her rage.

Nick resents that he is blamed for all their difficulties, insisting that Laura plays a part. "Long before I spent time on the computer Laura would get completely wasted [smoking cannabis] and I was left feeling abandoned. Or, she would make endless demands that overwhelmed me. We both have ways of disengaging, it's not just me."

Nick recognises his lifetime tendency to become absorbed in a single activity. "I definitely have an addiction to doing things rather than facing problems. When I was growing up it was swimming, then in college it was smoking dope; with both I was completely absorbed. Maybe the computer has just become my most recent activity."

It turned out that being absorbed in something to avoid relationship problems was a family trait. "I remember my father being completely absorbed in work and it coming between my parents. My mum would become so frustrated that she would shout and that would lead to arguments."

Nick may have missed out on observing how couples solve problems and respond to one another's feelings successfully. Could he recognise his part in creating the same relationship with Laura? By spending time on the computer, he was certain to frustrate his partner and cause her to respond as his mother had. Painful, yes, but at least it was familiar, and it fitted the map of a couple he had in his head.

Nick and his father are not alone. Many men retreat into man space to the frustration of women. Psychoanalysts offer explanations as to why men tend to step back in relationships while women long to be close. Boys develop their sense of identification by having to be different from their mothers. Distance helps them to develop their self, separate and apart. Girls, however, develop a sense of their femininity by identifying with, and being close to, their mothers. This dichotomy can trigger conflicts in adult relationships when men long for time alone, while women need conversation, closeness and companionship.

Men often experience their mothers as warm and nurturing on the one hand, but scolding disciplinarians on the other. As a result, they attempt to get the best part of a woman (warmth and nurturing) and avoid the unpleasant part (nagging and scolding). They may regard conversations as emotional mine-fields when they can

be told off without any warning; the longer it goes on, the higher the risk they will get yelled at. So this is where the shed comes in handy. Problem is, you never know which “mummy” is there to greet you when you come out.

When I initially met Nick and Laura, they were about to separate. Laura, having no evidence that Nick was willing to cut down his time on the computer, had asked him to move out. Through our conversations, their perceptions of the situation have shifted as they have gained new insights about their problem. Rather than simply blaming one another, they both have begun taking responsibility for their part. “It’s very painful, but I can see what I did to push him away,” says Laura. “I can understand why he felt he had been abandoned by me, and why he felt he had to find an alternative in the computer. It’s much harder work to see my part, but I want to keep at it and see where we end up this time.”

For Nick, what shifted was his realisation of the pain he was causing Laura by spending so much time on the computer. He was ready to listen to her once she was willing to acknowledge her part. The similarities he recognised in his parents’ relationship to his own also struck a chord. Perhaps for the first time he realised that not all solutions were found online and that he may need professional help.

They now had an understanding of their situation which helped them to move away from the cycle of blame and criticism that did little more than ensure that Nick spent more time on the computer.

Taking the focus off the computer had also given them an opportunity to concentrate on the real issues and themes of their relationship; such as how they respond to each other’s needs, their communication styles, and how they might create a happier relationship than the models they carried from their childhoods.

As many couples will discover, the garden shed is the place to repair lawn mowers, not relationships.

Nick and Laura are not their real names

Preventing a crash

Women

Remember that men need time on their own to think things through. He’ll be more willing to compromise once he can see that you understand his needs as well.

Good communication is essential. He needs to feel that conversations aren’t exercises that are designed to show up his weaknesses.

Try to avoid blame, criticism and sarcasm. These will make him feel justified in spending more time in the shed.

Don't ignore the situation if he's creating problems for you and the family. Time doesn't seem to exist in man space, so set limits that are fair for all parties.

Examine your own behaviour and take responsibility for your part in the problem.

Make sure that you are enjoying yourself, too, and not just burning calories at the gym or fighting for a parking space at the supermarket. If you want to learn how to look after yourself and have a good time without worrying about anyone else, study your husband. Chances are he's been doing it for years.

Men

Although the shed/computer has become a solution for many of your problems, if it is creating difficulties in your relationship it is no longer a constructive response to your problems.

Like it or not, you'll have to take other people's needs into account and reduce the time you spend on solitary activities. Appreciate other people's needs and learn to compromise.

Take some responsibility for sorting out relationship difficulties. Put down the DIY manuals and try reading a self-help book instead.

Realise that her frustration and unhappiness is not simply criticism. It's not always about you; it may be to do with her needs and feelings.

If your partner is constantly having a go at you, she is probably doing it because she doesn't feel that she has got through to you. If you feel overwhelmed by her nagging, instead of retreating to the "shed", try to listen and understand what she is really saying.

As a woman needs time with her man to feel secure, avoiding conversation is likely to leave her feeling rejected.

It's an illusion to believe that the perfect world exists inside your "shed", while all hell lies outside.