

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh



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Guest: Doug Foresta **Guest Title:** n/a

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Debra: Hello. This is Debra Ruh, and you're listening to Human Potential at Work. Today, Doug Foresta is joining me, and we're going to have a conversation about reducing the stress in your life.

Welcome, Doug.

Doug: Hi, Debra, thank you so much. It's great to be here with you. Yeah, we're going to talk about, I know reducing stress, and more specifically, what I wanted to talk to you about is this idea of the role of technology in our lives. Maybe we could start with, I know that you and I talk frequently and we both have children, and not that children are the only ones getting involved with technology, but I know you were talking about for you and your daughter Sara, you were having an issue with Sara, correct? The technology was getting in the way and interfering with the relationship?

Debra: Yes. I've talked a little bit about Sara. Sara is such a gift in my life and she's a teacher. Sometimes she teaches me by acting out and really pushing every one of my buttons, God bless her, but also she's my daughter, so that makes sense. Just to remind the listeners, Sara is 29 years old and Sara is an amazing woman and Sara was also born with Down Syndrome.

And so what I found over the last seven or eight months is Sara has been acting out a lot and she's been being very stubborn. If I ask her to do something that normally she would do with no problem, like go to work at Nordstrom's or go with me to Zumba or things that always she enjoyed, it's like, no thank you, no thank you, and it's just a real pushback.

I was trying to figure out what that was about, and we talked a little bit on another program about Sara not wanting me to always talk about her having Down Syndrome, and she used the word saying, I want you to treat me like I'm normal. Her brother is moving on with his life. I get all those things.

But what I started noticing also, not just with Sara, I see it with myself and I see it -- we've had a lot of conversations about this, Doug, but that Sara was going into her technology in ways that it's almost like she couldn't come out. Let me ground

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

that statement for you, Doug. So I remember one day, I came into Sara's room and I'd been working hard all day, and I work from home, and I hadn't really been paying attention what she was doing. And my husband was doing something else and wasn't paying attention. And I walked in her room and she had all the lights turned off and she's laying in her bed, and usually Sara always has the light on. So I was surprised, and I'm like, Sara, what are you doing? And she was just in this awful, awful mood. I was really surprised by the mood, and honestly I was a little bit scared and intimidated. It's one of those moments you're like, oh, I know I can handle this as a parent.

And so what had happened was Sara had done a little private marathon with a TV series in the United States called Superstition, which is a very scary show, and she'd done a marathon. She had watched like eight episodes in a row, back-to-back.

Doug: Oh, boy.

Debra: I know. Oh my goodness. And it's a very dark show. Demons are coming out of the roof and they're always attacking innocent people, and it's just a scary, cool, glamorous, scary, fearful show. And I thought, oh no, my daughter has been in this room most of the day, just immersing herself in this technology, this dark show. Right, Doug?

And then I started noticing that she would go on her iPhone and she would -- every time I would walk in her room, she would look to me, what I perceived as guilty of something. And I thought, okay, Sara, what are you doing there? So I looked at her phone one time and what Sara was doing was, she's playing this app and I think it's called Sing It. I think there's a movie about it right now. She actually sings with another person and they sing, and then you can record it and keep playing it. So it's a very innocent activity Sara was doing, Doug. It was beautiful. And she's reading and she's singing. Well, that's not bad.

But what happened was I realized that she would get so intensely into it that she wouldn't come out. She wouldn't come to dinner, she didn't want to go to Zumba, she didn't want to go to work. All she wanted to do was play that app, and she didn't want me or my husband engaging with her.

And so then I started thinking about, what's happening in my own life and many others, being immersed in the television and the political drama and what's happening in Brexit and is the UN going to get unfunded, and all of that stuff. I thought, how is it for Sara, who has an intellectual disability, how is she supposed to handle this firehose of content that's coming at us?

And then, Doug, I remember you told me a story about your son Sam, who doesn't have a disability but he does like his devices. You talked about a story.

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

Doug: Oh my gosh, actually this morning we just had something like that. He has ADHD, and he takes forever to get ready in the morning. He's 11, and he just takes his time and he wanders around. He's like, I'm getting dressed, but he's not getting dressed. He's on his phone. He's so good, because I'm terrible with follow through and sometimes I'll forget what I even said. So I told him, you have to get dressed and get ready, and then once you're ready, if there's time left, then you can play on your phone.

And of course, he's sitting at the table this morning, eating breakfast, and he's watching YouTube videos on his phone. He likes to watch Minecraft videos. And so I told him to put it away, and he slams it down, "I wasn't watching it." So I guess I must be hallucinating. He got caught, right? He got caught and he was angry about it.

It's interesting because one of the questions I would have for you to think about is, do these technologies make us more or less connected? I'm curious, Debra, for you, what you think about that. Not just social media, but these technologies like mobile devices, do you think they make us more or less connected to each other?

Debra: Well, I know we're having a lot of conversations about this off air as well, but I guess it depends on what we mean by connected, right?

Doug: Right.

Debra: So I know for sure, I'm more connected because I'm all over social media, and I'm very deliberate when I come to what I share on social media. But I'm on social media and I found myself during some presidential elections in the U.S., I was glued to the comedy shows, the political comedy shows, or I was watching television. There's just so many ways these screens draw us in.

And so I've often thought we're more connected, right? But then what I start realizing is a lot of the connections, not all of them, but if you're not careful the connections are very shallow and I think they can do us almost more harm than good, in certain ways. I engage with people that I've never met in person, through technology.

As a matter of fact, Doug, you and I have been friends and mentors to each other for almost nine years. And you and I, we've never physically met. I mean, we're like best of friends, but we've never physically met.

Doug: I posed this question last night. I was teaching a class about the clinical implications of technology, and I posed this question to people. Are the relationships that you make online or via technology, are they real relationships? Debra, I consider our relationship to be one of the closest relationships I have.

Debra: Right, right, and technology helps us have that relationship.

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

Doug: And technology helps us, and we're having this conversation right now and we're connecting.

Debra: Right, because of technology. So I think the danger is -- and I'm speaking from my experience. So the danger, of course, is that we don't really, truly engage. I think you can engage with technology and you can have real meaningful relationships on technology. It always tickles me when I'm out at a speaking event or I'm somewhere and somebody says, we're connected on Twitter, or we're connected on Facebook. It's like, okay, what's your handle? And it's like I'm re-meeting an old friend.

But then the dangers -- I'll give you a troubling example. Whenever in the United States when we had the attacks on our World Trade Center on 9/11, and I remember that I could not stop watching the television. I couldn't stop looking at my device. Psychiatrists were coming online and on television saying, okay, we really recommend, Americans, that you sort of step back and stop watching it 24/7, because it's making us more and more and more stressed. I remember the time in the financial crisis and major times in our lives, and right now in the United States there's a lot of people very stressed out because of the presidential changes. And it doesn't really matter which side, if you voted, who you voted for. I think everybody is really, really, stressed.

I look at the content and the way people are connected and engaging with each other, and a lot of it, I think, is very dangerous for our mental health. I was talking to my doctor about -- Sara went in for a physical and I was talking to my doctor a little bit about how I started noticing the technology, if I let her stay on the technology too long -- and I'm trying to figure out how long that is, but it seems to be more than an hour -- that it's almost like she gets so immersed in it that when I come to say, hey, Sara, why don't you come and go for a walk with me, or you have a friend that's come over, she doesn't want to come out. She doesn't want to come out of that fugue or something she's in.

Embarrassingly, Sara and I have gotten into a couple of wrestling matches, where I'm trying to take her phone away from her and she's hiding it, and I'm thinking, oh my gosh, Debra, what are you doing? You're two adult women. You shouldn't be wrestling over the telephone. But I had to do that a couple times, and now when I'll say to her, put the phone down or I'm going to take it away from you, she knows I actually will, if I have to, wrestle her to get it. And I have longer arms than her. It's ridiculous.

But I think about all of us, whether you're in the United States, whether you're a person with a disability, you're a parent. But I was talking to my doctor about it, Dr. Hayden Pasco, which she's an amazing woman. We had some snow days in Virginia, about three days of snow, and she said her son was in gaming. He was doing games, probably like your son does, Doug, and she said she started noticing

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

about the second day into it, that her son was actually displaying significant signs of depression. And she's a doctor and she's seeing this so much. She realized her son was actually -- who doesn't normally display this, showing her signs of mental health distress and depression.

And so what she did was she made him stop, and there was a big fight about that, and she took him to their gym and made him go swimming, and she said it was like night and day. And she said, Debra, I don't think as a society, we are really prepared with what's going to happen with us engaging so much with technology and not truly with each other.

Even though technology can be used for great good, just like what we're doing right now, it also can really, really cause us to disengage from each other. It almost reminds me, in the past we had our problems in the United States, sometimes we still do, but there were periods of time where people were very aggressive with each other on the roads, and somebody would cut somebody off and they would shoot them a finger. And I would think, but I can see you, but it's almost like there was some kind of imaginary line that, it's okay for me to be super ugly and rude to you.

Doug: You would never do that. You don't see people doing that when they're in line at the grocery store.

Debra: Right, unless it's Black Friday, right.

Doug: Well, it's interesting because, I mean, the thing about technology is that it's always a double-edged sword. One of the things we were talking about again last night is, think about for example, the technology of fire, when man first harnessed, or woman first harnessed fire, and what that must have been like. And you say to yourself, is fire a good technology or a bad technology? And of course, the answer is if you're making a barbecue and you've got a delicious steak, if you're not a vegetarian, or whatever it is you're making, then it's great. If your house is burning down, it's not so great.

But I just think of fire that way because it can cut both ways. And also, once we start it we can't always control where it goes.

Debra: Yeah, I think that's a wonderful analogy. I love technology and I love social media. I remember when Steve Jobs passed away. I was so sad. And I don't know Steve Jobs. I learned Steve Jobs is very difficult, sometimes, to work with, and with his genius there was not always good engaging and connection with other human beings. But I remember being so sad about this man passing, because he actually allowed my daughter to engage in technology in such a more impactful way, because of the work that they did at Apple.

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

I read an article by a reporter, I forget the gentleman's name, but he wrote this beautiful blog about Steve Jobs passing and how important it was for society and technology, but for him personally because he had a three-year-old son who couldn't communicate. And so how they communicated with him was actually with the iPad. And so what this technology did for his son and for his family, it was powerful and beautiful and amazing.

I remember hearing another story of a young girl with Down Syndrome. She was 15 years old and she needed help with communications. And so a speech therapist at her school had recommended that she get this communications device that was three feet long and \$8,000, and it was something that traditionally they had used a lot. The young 15-year-old with Down Syndrome said -- and she did a lot of research and she said -- and this was years ago -- why wouldn't I just get an iPad with some applications, because I can carry this around. And this is like five years ago, and it was like, oh yeah, I guess we could use it that way.

I remember going into the Apple store once and talking to them about what I was seeing for the community of people with disabilities with their iPhones being so accessible, and their iPads. And they got really excited and they said, we have parents and individuals with disabilities coming in all the time and telling us how we're using this technology to really improve their lives.

So there's beauty in technology, but I think the fire is a great example. There's also danger. There's also a danger because so many people with disabilities, especially intellectual disabilities, have a tendency to get almost shut in, they don't have the same social opportunities as their peers. There's almost a danger sometimes of someone like Sara getting so immersed in technology that it's difficult to get her out, and engaging with other members of society.

So I'm on my guard about that now, and she knows it. The other night she said, oh, you can leave my phone in the room at night, and I said, yeah, I don't think so. The scientists say it is not good for you to be sleeping with your iPhone and your devices because of the pinging and the lights, they keep you up at night. And she said, well, mom, why don't we turn it off? And I said, okay, I think that's a good idea. We will turn it off and we will leave it plugged in here, and you have to promise me, and I'm going to trust you, that in the middle of the night you're not going to turn it on and be on this device. Because that's something else we were seeing happening, was Sara was on in the middle of the night and the next day she was exhausted. Not to mention, sometimes she would post these weird posts on Facebook like, I'm a vampire, or just weird things I don't want her posting. You know, who are you talking to?

But it's not just Sara with Down Syndrome, it's me struggling to -- after the 2016 presidential election, I stopped listening to the news, I stopped watching the comedy shows. It wasn't so funny to me anymore. It almost felt to a point like I was drinking poison. I remember the other day, Doug, I turned on the television

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

and it was -- you know how it goes to the channel that was on there before, and the news was on. The news came on and said 18 people are dead in Georgia because these tornadoes have whipped through, and then it's coming up the east coast. And they showed the devastation, and I just stood there horrified by this and thinking about these poor people, and then they showed a clip of President Trump and he's going to do this and it's going to hurt all these people. And then there was another terrifying news clip, and I felt like I was drinking poison. I felt so traumatized by five minutes.

I went into my room and I thought, it's like Armageddon. I just started getting really freaked out and I thought, okay, Debra, obviously you need to be on a better technology diet. I worked my way out of it, but I'm talking to friends and people are really struggling with this right now. I'm sure you're seeing it.

Doug: The question for me becomes -- and I don't know the answer to this -- are people, let's say with disabilities or people who maybe are a bit quirky or outside of the norm, are they more susceptible to -- we're all susceptible to these dangers of technology, but are some people more susceptible to it?

Debra: And I think some people are more susceptible to it. I know Sara, even though she doesn't like me to talk about the Down Syndrome, Sara sometimes has some OCD tendencies. And so some of the way that Sara is put together, actually does make her more susceptible. It's like I'll go in and I'll get in these bad places, like the story I just said, but I have taught myself over the years some tools, to actually take me out of it and say, come on, Debra, you watched five minutes. They're trying to scare you. The world is okay. We'll be okay. So I have taught myself things to do, to meditate, to pray, to get quiet, to turn off the technology.

But Sara doesn't have those same tools and Sara processes information differently than I do. And so I actually do think there are some people in our society, not just people with disabilities, but I think people that don't know how to talk themselves off the ledge, that are more susceptible. I think people with certain type of disabilities are going to be more susceptible. My husband, our beloved father, his father, my father-in-law, just passed away, and I find that my husband is more susceptible to some of the negative technology and being depressed by it than he usually is, because my husband is in an active state of very raw grief right now.

So counselors, what are you all seeing? It must be wild what you're seeing, Doug. How do we help people be attuned and really self-aware that we are constantly being dogged to get this prescription and buy these new clothes or this purse is going to make you feel better. So we have all that consumer data coming at you. And you want to be a more beautiful person, all you need is this makeup.

Doug: Right, exactly.

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

Debra: And then the negativeness of social media. ISIS is coming to kill us all or we're handcuffing five-year-old Americans coming in from Iran, what? I just think there's so much that's so scary.

Doug: Yeah, I woke up this morning and I'm really aware now, the ways in which the media is incredibly negative. Usually I get up and I turn on my phone, I look, did anyone text me, did anyone call me? And then I usually go to CNN or USA Today, to the big networks, and flipping through the mobile device, and it's literally every single headline is something bad happening in the world. You could just replace it with, danger, danger.

As a matter of fact even as we're talking, some breaking news. I have the CNN alert, like some breaking news comes across the screen. So we're constantly being bombarded with a lot of very negative stories that are about threatening our welfare, threatening our lives. One of the questions is, what's the cost of that emotionally to do that? What's the cost of having all these negative emotions? And then it's great to be informed, but is there a point at which we could become too informed, where we just can't even process?

Debra: I think there definitely is. As I've walked just some of the trauma personally, with my father-in-law dying, and I loved him so much, and seeing my daughter see her father cry really for the first time, and that confused her, and then she's thinking, wait a minute, that means if his father could die, and we've had long talks about death. And I believe it's a beautiful place when we die, so I'm not afraid of death, but once again, how is Sara processing it, and how's my son processing it?

But I'm reading a book right now, it's called The Urban Monk. I love this audible book. I highly recommend it, The Urban Monk. I forget the author's name, but he's really, really good and he talks about this a little bit and about how we actually are poisoning our mind. He's saying -- which I just can't do and maybe this is an excuse -- but he's saying unplug from all technology for a month. And I'm like, oh, I can't do that because that's my work.

Doug: For you and I, it might be a little difficult, yeah.

Debra: But I understand what he's saying. And one thing I found is that -- years ago I stopped doing this -- I refuse to watch television programs, no matter how amazing they are, that starts with the first scene is somebody gets murdered and then they're going to figure out who did it. I won't watch it. And so I'm very, very careful about the negativeness that I bring in, because I just can't handle it. I've told viewers before that I struggle with depression, and I find my depression gets worse when I watch those kind of shows. Even watching a comedy show where somebody is making fun of somebody's hair or somebody is making fun of somebody that looks like they have a terrible neck or whatever, the mean spiritedness behind that, I can't stand the energy. And so I wonder, how is Sara

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

handling something like that if I can't handle it? How does Sam, your son, handle it? Is my husband more vulnerable, maybe, to feeling depressed because his father just passed.

And so I hear a lot of conversations being talked about this right now, too, Doug. When you start feeling really overwhelmed, put down the technology and go outside and go for a walk. If you can't, then just breathe, just breathe. But I think we have to do a much better job of protecting ourselves and others from all of this negative content.

I'm going to give you another example, Doug, that shows what a dork I am. But we live in Virginia, I love Virginia, and we live in the middle of the country. There was a tornado warning about, I don't know, eight months ago or something and it was really bad. A tornado had actually be sited on my road, but it's a long road. And so I'm watching the weather channel, we're standing in the hallway because it's the safest place in the house, and the weather channel is saying very urgently, there are tornados. If you're in this area, you have to take cover, you have to take cover. And I'm getting so freaked out, and then my phone is going off and you're getting these alert warnings. You're in a dangerous area, protect yourself.

So I'm on the phone with my son, saying, honey, I know you're 25 miles from me, but there's tornadoes here so you need to take -- and I'm just getting so freaked out, and my son's like, mom, take a breath, turn off the TV, get into the hallway, but you getting so freaked out and them screaming at you from the television set that you're going to die, I don't think that's going to help the situation, mom.

Doug: But at least their ratings will be good.

Debra: And we survived it, too. A couple of trees went down, down the road. And even if we didn't survive it, what is it going to help me getting that freaked out about it, right?

Doug: What I hear you saying, Debra, is it's really important for us, A, to be aware, to ask ourselves these questions about the cost of being plugged in all the time, and then the other piece I hear you saying is that we need to take some time to consciously unplug. Would that be fair to say?

Debra: It is very fair to say, and I think we've got to be conscious of how it's impacting those that we love and those that maybe -- students or whoever we're responsible for, we all need to be on our guard against it and we need to use the technology tools that allow us to buffer content and things like that, but actually take the time to really back away and truly engage with another person, or other people. I think it's for all of us, but I think it is certainly something that we need to be thinking about as the disability community as well. So I agree with your summation, Doug.

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

Doug: Debra, this is such a great conversation. I know that we'll continue this conversation, but just bringing it up and being able to start asking ourselves these questions about what are the costs, and then again, particularly are certain people more vulnerable to these issues. We're all vulnerable to it, but are some of us even more vulnerable to it? And then how do we take care of ourselves? How do we take care of our family? Very timely for me, because I just had this fight with my son, not a couple hours ago.

Debra: Yeah, I think it's very timely for everybody, no matter where you are in the world. I think it's a timely conversation, and I think we should be very aware of it. And like you said, Doug, really be aware of the cost to individuals and to mental health. And also, that we need to be aware that there are some media outlets, some news that are very consciously trying to scare us to death. We need to be aware of that.

Doug: Thank you so much, Debra. Thank you for this conversation, and I look forward to continuing it.

Debra: I agree. Thank you so much, Doug. You always add so much value to the program, so thank you for joining me.

Doug: Thank you.

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