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Celeste Headlee Speech

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In a world of technology, face to face communication has become harder for people to do correctly, according to Celeste Headlee in the annual Dean Stone Lecture at the University of Montana. Her passion is breaking the stigma that communication is a hard thing to do.

"Human beings are the most sophisticated communicators on the planet, as far as we know," Headlee said. "That's our evolutionary superpower."

Headlee labels herself on her website as a "Communication and Human Nature Expert, Award-winning journalist, and Author." She is best known for her work as a broadcast journalist, and her best-selling novel "We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations that Matter." She gave a TEDx Talk on how to have better conversations that has over 30 million views. Headlee has anchored multiple radio broadcast programs, and she was the executive producer of "On Second Thought" at Georgia Public Radio.

Headlee "fell" into radio. She wasn't planning on working in radio broadcasting. But when she accompanied her mom to a radio station for an interview about her grandfather, one of the interviewers asked her if she had ever thought about radio. She hadn't, but she figured she'd give it a try.

"Journalism requires a higher level of listening," Headlee said. "If you're going to be a good journalist, you cannot assume you know the answers to the questions you ask. I became an expert in communication because I was trying to become a better journalist."

Headlee is passionate about helping others to communicate better. She wants to inform others about the power of effective communication in and out of the workplace. In her book "We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations that Matter," she lays out ways that we can create better communication habits for ourselves.

"We're are talking a lot. We're talking more than we ever have before. We're not actually conversing with one another." Headlee explains that a conversation requires a mutual exchange of ideas, and we (as human beings in today's society) are not doing much of that anymore. We're just talking about things we know and interests, without letting ourselves be changed by anything we hear.

Headlee explained during her speech that addictive pleasure isn't the same as true happiness, and how addictive pleasure is one of the primary sources of our communication problems.

"One of the things that go wrong in our conversations with each other is that we're addicted to dopamine," Headlee said. "Dopamine is your fight or flight mode. It's extremely addictive. Talking about yourself activates the area of your brain where dopamine lives. It makes us mean and selfish." She further explained that our fight or flight response has enabled us to want to have easy conversations, avoid small talk, or not converse with people at all.

Technology companies have taken advantage of the addictiveness of dopamine and developed apps in ways that tell dopamine to release into our brains. Headlee says that because we are so addicted to electronics, our interactions with people have changed even when we don't have a cell phone in our hands.

But technology isn't the problem. Headlee said that tools aren't the problem because we've been using them forever, but communication hasn't been a problem forever. She used the example of when we pick up a screwdriver, our brain thinks of it as an extension of our bodies. But we eventually put it down once we're done with our task.

"Our bodies aren't designed to hold a tool 24 hours a day," Headlee said. "But one in five people will admit to sleeping with their cell phone. One in five people admit to taking a shower with their cell phones." Headlee says that technology makes it so much easier to avoid talking to people.

The problem with technology is not just a problem for young people. Headlee reiterated in her speech that baby boomers are just as likely to be addicted to their cell phones as millennials are.

All generations alive today have varying degrees of difficulty with communication. Many people shield themselves from face to face contact with their cell phones, while some refuse to go out and socialize in their old age.

"If you want to volunteer to make the world a better place, you don't actually have to go to a soup kitchen or spend money and send it to the Red Cross," Headlee said. "All you have to do is sit down and let somebody talk to you."