



**One year on: renegotiating tech use in a changed world
with Mandy Saligari**

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Episode Transcript

Host: Kirkland Newman

Guest: Mandy Saligari

The MindHealth360 Show - Mandy Saligari

Mandy Saligari (00:04):

You've got teenagers at home who are socializing on their tech. They're staying connected via their tech, they're schooling on their tech. They're unable to meet with each other. And so a lot of parents are very worried about where that line is drawn. Should I be trying to control my tech use as much as I was before COVID and so on? And I think overarchingly no, the rules now need to change. We need to renegotiate those parameters.

Kirkland Newman (00:32):

Welcome to The MindHealth360 Show. I'm Kirkland Newman, and if you or your loved ones suffer from mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, poor memory, poor attention, mood swings, exhaustion, stress, etc, I interview the leading integrative mental health experts from around the world to help you understand the root causes of these symptoms, many of which may surprise you, and suggest solutions to help you heal over the long-term. If you want further information, please go to www.mindhealth360.com, or find us on social media.

Kirkland Newman (01:11):

Mandy Saligari, welcome to the MindHealth360 Show. So you are the Co-founder and Clinical Director of Charter Harley Street and a registered therapist. You're a published author and regular contributor to press radio and television. I would say you originally specialized in addiction treatment and codependency and you entered the field after coming into recovery in 1990 and quickly earned a reputation for clinical excellence and very successful outcomes. And you wrote Proactive Parenting, which is very, very good. And you've got a three part series, In Therapy for Channel 5. Now there are a lot of other things I could say about you because you've got a very complete biography, but I will leave it there because I know we don't have much time. But what I wanted to ask you Mandy is about two years ago, you were doing a MindHealth360 event on sort of how to navigate technology and technological devices and social media for better mental health because we know that's a huge problem.

Kirkland Newman (02:09):

Now two years on because of this pandemic and the fact that we're all sort of in lockdown at home, or a lot of us are or have been, we've become so incredibly reliant on our computers and on our devices. And both for homeschooling. So our kids are on these devices, we are on the devices all day long. So in light of that, how do you advise people to handle the fact that they're constantly online, constantly on screens, that their kids are constantly on screens? Obviously we have to live with this, but what would you tell parents and adults and kids and teenagers on how to navigate these devices given the things that we've explored in the event and the dangers of them and the pitfalls, but light of our increased dependence on them?

Mandy Saligari (03:01):

Okay. So I think where I would start is to say, I get asked this a lot at the moment which is: what's the difference between addiction and the sort of context that we're living in at the moment, which is the COVID context? And fundamentally, addiction is when you are using something in an attempt to fix how you feel to detrimental effect. So for example, if you have emotions you can't cope with and you outsource them to something like tech use, then you create a dependence. So if every time I'm angry or every time I'm sad, I go on to tech to distract myself away, I might gain momentary relief, but I never actually learn how to handle those emotions. So fundamentally, the kind of core principle of addiction is

The MindHealth360 Show - Mandy Saligari

that you outsource your emotional process onto something else and thereby create dependence and create an immaturity in yourself because you never learn how to handle those feelings. So that's the premise of addiction.

Mandy Saligari (04:08):

This isn't about how much we use, it's about why you use something and what happens to you as a result. So then you cut to massive kind of tech use. You've got teenagers at home who are socializing on their tech, they're staying connected via their tech, they're schooling on their tech. They're unable to meet with each other. And so a lot of parents are very worried about where that line is drawn. Should I be trying to control my tech use as much as I was before COVID and so on? And I think overarchingly no, the rules now need to change. We need to renegotiate those parameters. If you're fortunate enough to have children, teenagers that you can talk to, then that's a big plus because I think we need to be talking with our teens, they need to be talking to us.

Mandy Saligari (05:01):

I have spoken to a lot of teenagers since the pandemic, my kind of clinical practices increased with that age group. And I've encouraged every single one of them to go back to their parents and try and talk to them about developing if you like, or adjusting the boundaries according to the social context. So yes, they're on Zoom all day on their schooling. Yes, they then get onto their gaming devices and so on. Yes, they then get onto social media. And yes, it's really important that those forums allow them to stay connected and stay part of a kind of social network. And I think for parents, it's difficult, they're under a lot of pressure. And I think the instinct of a parent is to move into control. And I think that's a problem. I mean lockdown is governmental control. So if you then try to do micro-controlling in the home, you're going to end up with loads of rouse with no space to allow those rouse to kind of disperse and so on.

Mandy Saligari (06:09):

So lots of thoughts about it. But in essence, when your teenager is stomping around the place and in a mood, much better to be standing shoulder to shoulder with them and realizing that they are suffering from this kind of, I suppose, repression at a time when they should be spreading their wings, than tell them to stop being so moody, get a grip and lay the table because you're just going to get a massive backlash. So I think for parents it's really important to stand back and recognize the container that their teenager is in, which is massively at odds with where they should be at the moment, spreading their wings. And engage with more tolerance, more curiosity and understand that the impact on our children, whether they're tiny and supposedly going to nursery or teenagers and ready to leave the family home, the parents really need to take a deep breath and understand the social context and how that is affecting teens and children because they are at a really steep stage of learning.

Kirkland Newman (07:19):

Completely. And I think that's absolutely true. And one of the issues though that I've noticed with my two boys who are 12 and 15, is that they used to be quite sort of tech-addicted I would say, in the sense that whenever they felt upset or anxious or sad, they would immediately go to their tech. That was sort of their default position. What I've noticed now is that it's definitely worse. I mean you literally can't get their head out of the phone. You can't get them off their screens. It's almost become completely habitual for them to be just... Their screen is their main friend. So what I try and do is insist on family meals. And I

say, "Let's sit down for lunch and let's sit down for dinner," and that's all I seem to be able to do. Or "Let's go for a walk," from time to time.

Kirkland Newman (08:05):

But all that is met with huge amounts of resistance and sort of anger. And my eldest will say, "Well I'm with my friends and I'm socializing with my friends and you've got to leave me," etc. And I think you're right, but where does one draw that line? And what are the long-term consequences? So if schools do resume as they're meant to say in March, how do we handle the fact that there has been this increased habit and has it rewired their neural pathways for something that we're not going to be prepared for and that we're going to have to somehow prune back?

Mandy Saligari (08:41):

Okay. Two questions, firstly, where do you draw the line? One of the things I would say, I work with a lot of people who have eating disorders. I am going to take you off piece for a second. Lots of families say, I want you to come to family meals and that's the point of connection. It is also often a battle ground. And that's where sometimes disordered eating can evolve from because families try to put together the family meal with communication. And I think that we need to separate them up. So with my own kids, I say to them, "Listen, I just want to talk to you. I just want some time to check in with you and talk to you." If you think about all the psychological experiments and so on, we know that the primary focus for anyone is attachment. That is the primary focus. So why muddle it with a family meal?

Mandy Saligari (09:31):

Attachment is our primary core social motive. So let's go after attachment as our greater kind of counterpart, if you like, to any addictive process. So I say to my kids, "Listen, I know that you're on schooling on Zoom or you're at university on Zoom and I know it's where you socialize. Alongside that, I want to stay connected to you. I want to know what's going on. I want us to be able to chat." So I look for contact with my kids. I want to know where they're at. I want to be able to gossip with them, chat with them, connect with them. Not a big deep and meaningful, I don't yet know any teenager who wants to sit down and have a proper deep and meaningful with mother or father. Yes, with their friends, but I just want to touch base.

Mandy Saligari (10:13):

So it's more like an intermittent exchange. 10, 15 minutes, a few times through the day. I just want to check in, see how you are, have a bit of a laugh, have some positive interaction. And I give this back to them. I want to know that they're eating healthily. I want to know that they're drinking water. And I want to know that they're doing something other than sitting in front of a screen with their brains. And I've explained that kicking a ball around, going out for a walk, walking the dog, sweeping the floor, it doesn't matter, it uses a different part of the brain and it keeps me more at ease with them spending so much time in front of screens.

Mandy Saligari (10:50):

I also say that ultimately, all I'm trying to do is to do a good parent job. It's not my problem if they end up with prejudiced neuro pathways, it's theirs. It's their life. It's not for me to sweep up or for me to prune, particularly not for an older teen. It's their consequence. It's their legacy. Now, if I carry that and I say, what am I going to do to help counterbalance your dysfunctional patterns of behavior? They'll abdicate

The MindHealth360 Show - Mandy Saligari

responsibility. I become the consequence and they'll never engage in their own process. So I'm a great believer in promoting attachment, good self-care and explaining that it's not because I want to control that process. It's because I want to impart what I understand back to them so that they can survive this. And more than survive this, thrive through it. I think there are good lessons to be learned around boundaries, resilience, different ways of communicating. Managing to stay connected through COVID is an extraordinary thing to be able to do.

Mandy Saligari (11:52):

So I'm a huge supporter of it, but I also want you to be able to stay connected to me, your mom and to your siblings. So promoting attachment, really important. Popping into their rooms, going for a walk, them coming into the kitchen when you're washing up. Not insisting that they do the dishwasher, but just having them lounging about even if they're half on their phones and chatting to them, really important just to keep those connections. And then have the family meal and then have those things. I say disentangle the chat from the meals because then they all sit down and you've got all that rebellion going on and you really don't want to be mixing those things up.

Mandy Saligari (12:29):

And then when they go back to school, it's their challenge to overcome. What's it like for them to go back into a social network and be around people when they've achieved the kind of shortcut intimacy that happens when you're online because you don't have the regulation of being with another person. So you just say things, mean or nice, it doesn't really matter. You just say things because you have that kind of protection of not being in the same room as somebody. So it's a distorted way of creating, I suppose, attachment and relationship. So they're going to be nervous and they're going to compensate by being overconfident or by being shy. And it is their process, their journey, not ours as parents.

Mandy Saligari (13:16):

Ours is to remind them of the extraordinary circumstances we're in, to deliver them with patience, to show the understanding that this is difficult and to stand back with them and support them to take those steps, to go back into face-to-face social setting and support them through that transition. And I think there'll be mood swings, there'll be shifts in friendships. I think it will be a difficult time but they'll come through it.

Mandy Saligari (13:48):

You have to trust that your child will come through because if you rescue, if you step in to micro-manage, you might have the best answer in the world, but your meta message, your subconscious message is, I don't think you can do this. So whilst you're delivering them with a great idea, your other message is, you can't do this, I don't trust you. So you'll be eroding their self-esteem whilst delivering them with an answer. And it's the wrong way round. You need to be saying, it's tough, it's going to be a difficult transition. You need to be able to tolerate all the mood swings and you need to believe in them. And weather the storm, whether that is to stay on Zoom for God knows how long or whether that's to support them back into face-to-face. We need to stand back and believe in our children.

Kirkland Newman (14:35):

Yeah, I think that's absolutely fantastic. And so one of the things, two things that I'd wanted to take you up on. One of them was you were talking about self-care and how important it is to teach our children to

The MindHealth360 Show - Mandy Saligari

practice self-care because ultimately that really is the difference between dysfunctional tech use in some ways and functional tech use is if you break it up and practice self-care around it. The other one is connection, which you've covered quite a lot. What would be your advice to young people, teens, and also even adults in terms of self-care during this time?

Mandy Saligari (15:09):

Well I think that self-care is self-esteem in action. Okay? So if I actually care about myself, then I will take care of myself. But if I don't care about myself, then I won't take care of myself and that's a downward spiral. So the answer is even if I don't really care about myself, if I practice self-care, I will begin to care about myself. So we have to start with the action and not wait until we feel like it. And that's self-discipline. That is just knowing that when I get up, I make my bed. I draw my curtains, even if I have to close them again because it's easier on the screen to watch a screen with the curtains closed. When I get up, before I go downstairs for breakfast or whatever, I draw the curtains and let the light in. Open the windows, let the air in. Brush your teeth, shower, make your bed, all tiny forms of self-care, but really important.

Mandy Saligari (16:09):

Your external environment can not only reflect how you feel on the inside, but it can reinforce it. Go downstairs, eat something healthy, have a glass of water, say hello to your family. Just say hello. It doesn't have to be a big one, but just say hello. Connect with the kind of mainframe. If then you go back up to your bedroom or whatever you use tech in, and you want to close the windows, close the curtain and commit to whatever it is you're doing, schooling or gaming or whatever. Fine, but then schedule a break and try to honor that break. Notice your own negotiation around, "actually, do you know what? I'm in a game, I'll leave it for another 10 minutes, another 10 minutes, another 10 minutes" and then two hours pass. Notice how difficult it is for you to come off something and be conscious of that and realize if that's the case, tech is bigger than you.

Mandy Saligari (16:58):

In Alcoholics Anonymous, we say the man takes a drink, the drink takes a drink and then the drink takes the man. And the same applies to tech. So if as a teenager, as a kid, you're noticing that you are unable to stop once you've started, see that as a warning sign, see it as a warning sign. Your parents might be annoyed, but you should be worried. So if that's happening to you, put the brakes on, step away, go and do something else. And sometimes it's difficult to know what else to do. So when you're in a kind of calm state of mind, write down five things that you're happy to do, in inverted commas, if you were to break and then just have the self-discipline to go and do one of them. Walk the dog, do the dishwasher, go and talk to someone, walk around the block, start running, whatever it is. Because running and walking for example, stimulate left and right side of the brain and it's very good for calming you. It's very good for letting go of pent up energy and for recalibrating.

Mandy Saligari (17:58):

So that will make you more effective on your screen, better at your gaming, and probably better able to concentrate at school. So I just think really getting interested in yourself as your own asset, as your own vehicle, instead of looking at your parents as being a pain in the ass and getting in the way of what you want to do, notice you've got to live with yourself for the rest of your life. So take care of those

boundaries. It doesn't mean you can't go back to the gaming. It just means you need to learn how to manage yourself. Avoid the sugars, avoid the quick fix foods. And water, hydrate.

Kirkland Newman (18:34):

That's really, really good advice. And I think that works for a lot of parents as well as kids. And the other thing you mentioned was the boundary between healthy tech use and addiction. Which is essentially where you're using a tech use to sort of address your feelings, manage your feelings, deal with your feelings rather than feel them and deal with them yourself. What would be your advice if you notice that your children or adults or teenagers are actually using their tech as a sort of addictive process, to manage their own feelings. How would you address that?

Mandy Saligari (19:10):

Okay. What I would say is I'd say that if they are using tech to avoid how they feel, not manage, not deal with, because that's exactly what they're not doing, but to avoid their feelings, there are two things that I need to say. The first is if they're doing that, and this might be tough for some parents to hear. But if they're doing that, it might be because you as a parent don't model the behavior that says, "This is how you deal with your feelings." And when I say deal with your feelings, I mean, accept that we are all feelings beings and we are entitled to the full repertoire of emotion in a common curious way. So it's not, "I'm feeling angry therefore I've got a right to be angry and I'm now going to stomp around the place and be angry." It's to say, "I'm angry, I wonder why? I wonder what's getting to me? I wonder if I'm okay?"

Mandy Saligari (20:02):

Take a moment to consider what it is that's got under your skin and then try to, literally as you say, address it. If you are modeling that kind of behavior, then you are in much better position to go to your teenager or your kid. If you notice or you're concerned that they are outsourcing their emotional process to their tech use. And to say to them, "Listen, this isn't about the tech use. I'm happy for you to be on tech. I would just like to have a moment with you between when that rupture happened and you get on the tech," to kind of process out, acknowledge, mark. Again, doesn't have to be a deep and meaningful, but just to acknowledge, I feel bored, I feel frustrated, I feel so sad, I feel so lonely. I feel so frightened that I can't survive this. I feel so cut off from all my friends.

Mandy Saligari (20:53):

Any of those things, just allow them to touch those feelings, to stimulate them as feelings that then go through the body as an experience because you don't want them to be separate from their emotional process. It will create a backlog which will create a kind of binge further down the line to clear that backlog. And then say, they don't have to understand why they feel all those things or process them all through, put them into a file with a bow on. They just need to have them stimulated so they acknowledge them then go on tech. Then say, "Okay, go for it, go on tech. I'm glad you got something to do."

Mandy Saligari (21:30):

If however, you're a parent who isn't good with their emotions, we have a problem. Because going to your child to say, "I know you feel sad, talk to me about it," when you're a very sad person and you've repressed it and you eat on your feelings or you co-dependently fix everybody else because you don't want to look at yourself, you will not be safe territory for your child to bring their feelings to you. And

that's where we have a bit of a problem because I think a lot of parents that I meet anyway, so it's a prejudiced group of people, aren't good with their feelings. And therefore they can see the feelings in their teen, they're worried about the feelings in their child, but they are not equipped to deal with them because they haven't dealt with them themselves. So I would say if that's going on, take a moment, and I always promote the 12 step fellowships. I can't help myself, they are a free forum for people to go to.

Mandy Saligari (22:26):

You don't have to self identify as a codependent or as somebody who came out of a dysfunctional childhood yourself in order to attend these fellowships. Like the Adult Child of the Addictive family system, ACA, or Co-Dependents Anonymous, CoDA. You just have to be curious about your own process. So I think if you are a parent who is worried about your child but you don't feel across your own emotional process, find a way to get across your own emotional process first, talk to somebody who is equipped to help you with that and then go to your child to say, "I'm concerned about you." Otherwise, you might send your child further to ground.

Mandy Saligari (23:08):

And if you're middle-ground territory, you don't have any big, heavy difficulty with your own feelings and you're worried about your child, I would just say mark it. Mark it in a really casual way, "You seem sad. You seem lonely." What you're going to get back is, "Of course I am, Oh my God. Why do you have to keep doing all of that?" You're going to get that rebellion. Don't worry about it. Just say, "It's okay, I'm here for you in whatever way you wish." Because in suggesting the feeling, you might be able to stimulate or mark it as well. I think avoiding the emotions and allowing them all to dispute is a way of distorting those feelings and making them worse. So keep it simple, trust the process, take a look at your own unconscious messaging, try to support your child to separate their emotional process from their tech use.

Kirkland Newman (24:05):

I think that's fantastic. That's such good advice, Mandy. I just have one more quick question. There's this thing known as Zoom fatigue, which is people just on Zoom all day and this applies both to kids and adults. And I presume you've covered a lot of that in the self-care, but is there anything else that you would like to address around the Zoom fatigue?

Mandy Saligari (24:24):

Absolutely. So I work on Zoom all the time with people in an incredibly intense way. So I am locked on and listening. Once I come to the end of a session, I'm quite prone to turning up the music and leaping around the room and just connecting with my core energy. Maybe shaking off or connecting with, sometimes I'm not sure which it is, but I think music, water, air, just breathe and move because we get locked into one position, one concentration, it does become really tiring. So let your whole body carry this. Not just your eyes, not just your head, which is obviously all we frame. But just again, to let your whole body carry the experience, to nourish yourself. And to, as I say, drink water. But I love dance, I love music. I love just bringing myself back into the room, take a breath, settle down, go into the next session. So that would be my advice.

Kirkland Newman (25:32):

The MindHealth360 Show - Mandy Saligari

That's fantastic. Mandy, that's brilliant. I mean you've given us so much to work with. Is there anything else that you would just want to add that we haven't covered? We have just-

Mandy Saligari (25:42):

Yeah, possibly. One other thing, I love talking to you too as well. I love your curiosity. One of the things that I often get asked about and is being promoted is families that I've spoken to have said that they've been advised to keep really rigorous timetables, to try and allow the timetable that would exist outside of this context rigorously in place, keep the control. And I'm not sure I agree. I think it shouldn't be anarchy, but I think that each family should be looking at what their natural rhythm is. Certainly, and I'm fortunate I suppose, because I have some clients in different time zones. So I'm using Zoom at times when the rest of the family are asleep, which is great because I have privacy and quiet in the middle of the night. I think really have a look at the 24 hour timetable, the 24 hour clock.

Mandy Saligari (26:29):

Yes, the kids have got to get up and go to school because that's when school starts. But for those children who are able to school under their own theme, have a look when they're most effective time actually is instead of forcing them to get up at 8:00 AM and work to some predisposed timetable that's existed before COVID. Really look at when your family comes alive, really look at when your family is most effective and create your own timetable. Make sure that they have their three meals a day, make sure of course that they're drinking water and so on and so forth and make sure that everybody is achieving to the best of their capacity, whatever their responsibility is.

Mandy Saligari (27:09):

But I think this idea of up at 8:00, lunch at 1:00, supper at 7:00, bed at 10:00, I think is a micromanaging form of control within a greater kind of atmosphere of control being locked down. And I think it creates further frustration. So I would invite families to really think about what timetable works best for you and create your own microcosm. Reduce the frictions that are unnecessary, work together within this context and let's all get through it.

Kirkland Newman (27:40):

I love that. And I mean I wish that we could practice that more. I have one night owl who's 15 and he'll be up until 4:00 or 5:00 if I let him. And then one who's a morning person and he'll get up at 8:00 and go to bed at 10:00 or 9:00. And I try to encourage that. I try, I mean I don't encourage it, but I don't fight it. I've given up sort of fighting it. And I think you're right, being a little flexible. I just wish society would follow suit and I wish schools would let us do that a bit more because I think with teenagers especially, they are more effective if you let them sleep in the morning and they will work better that way a lot of them. So that's fantastic advice.

Kirkland Newman (28:19):

Excellent Mandy. Well you were wonderful, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it and have a wonderful rest of the day. And look forward to speaking to you soon.

Kirkland Newman (28:30):

The MindHealth360 Show - Mandy Saligari

Thank you so much for listening to the MindHealth360 Show. I hope that we've helped you realize that your mental health symptoms have root causes that can and need to be addressed in order to sustainably heal, and have given you some ideas about steps you may take to start your healing journey. Please share this interview with anyone you think may find it helpful. If you want further information, please go to www.mindhealth360.com, or check us out on social media. This information is for educational purposes only and is not intended to diagnose or treat any disease or to replace medical advice. Please always consult your healthcare practitioner before discontinuing any medication or implementing any changes in your diet, lifestyle or supplement program. Thank you.