

Infidelity in the digital age

We no longer have to venture out to meet prospective romantic partners. Thanks to social networking and an array of online dating sites and chat rooms, we can check out people in anonymity from the comfort of our living rooms. But while technology has made it easier to meet and communicate with people around the world, it has also muddied the waters regarding what constitutes infidelity.

A new definition

Cheating used to mean having sex with someone other than one's spouse or partner – for example, a co-worker, neighbor, acquaintance or even a total stranger. It involved clandestine meetings, whispered phone calls and a great deal of risk.

The digital revolution has changed all that. Now we have to ask if a sexual encounter outside of a marriage or committed relationship is the only criteria for infidelity. Does sending sexually explicit emails or texts (“sexting”) to someone other than your partner count as cheating? What about exchanging graphic, intimate photographs with an online friend? How about sharing confidences and flirting via Facebook? In other words, what is infidelity in this digital age?

It's about trust

Over the past decade, psychologists have been studying how technology has changed the way we view infidelity. They all agree that a virtual affair is every bit as painful to a betrayed partner as an in-the-flesh affair. One study shows it can even result in acute stress symptoms characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Sadly, many people don't realize how their secret online sexual behavior can affect their partners or relationships. They may even consider it innocent fun because the “affair” is taking place in cyberspace where people don't even meet. But infidelity is not so much about sex. It's about a trust that's been broken. It's about finding out your partner in life has kept secrets from you while sharing secrets with someone else.

In addition, a relationship without sex can be just as intense, or more so, than one involving physical contact, says Dr. Shirley Glass, author of *Not Just Friends: Rebuilding Trust and Recovering Your Sanity After Infidelity*. Not surprisingly, she says, the dynamics of these “platonic” liaisons often cross over into sexual love sooner or later. In fact, most do.

Setting boundaries

Since technology has redefined relationships – especially romantic and sexual relationships – couples need to take the time to discuss what they each consider to be infidelity. They need to ask each other what kinds of online behaviors are appropriate and which ones aren't. The rule should be that if you can't tell your partner everything about your online behavior, then you need to ask yourself why not.

Agree to never lie and never have secrets. The minute you omit or lie about your real or virtual world encounters with people of either sex, you're heading into shaky territory.

If you're in doubt about an online relationship, ask your partner. For example, you may feel there's nothing wrong in simply chatting to an old flame online. Your partner may not agree. Or your spouse may view their exchanging flirtatious texts with a co-worker as just a bit of innocent fun while you have a very different opinion.

Putting on the brakes

If you think – or know – your partner would consider your online behavior inappropriate – stop. Not sure? If you sometimes shut your laptop or quickly switch windows when your spouse enters the room then you know your activities are inappropriate.

Maintaining a mutually satisfying relationship takes ongoing effort, commitment, and trust. Many couples have found that they have benefited from meeting with a professional counselor, who can help identify areas to begin working on as well as strategies that are a good fit for the couple. Relationship building may sound like a lot of work, but the potential rewards that come from a satisfying, healthy relationship are endless.

Avoiding an emotional affair

Many of us form close relationships at work, through our social commitments or social networking sites, and we stay in touch via texting and posts. However, some of those friendships deepen and become more intense. The attachment and involvement increases as you spend more time with, think about, or communicate with that person. This can lead to what has been coined an “emotional affair”.

In an article entitled, *12 Warning Signs that it's Emotional Infidelity – and not 'Just Friendship'*, Dr. Athena Staik describes the following:

- Thinking and saying you're 'just friends' with someone over and over again.
- Treating him or her as a confidant, sharing intimate issues.
- Discussing troubling aspects of your marriage and partner.
- Comparing him or her verbally and mentally to your partner.
- Obsessively thinking or daydreaming about the person.
- Believing this person 'gets' you like no other.
- Pulling out of regular activities with your partner, family, or work to spend time with the person.
- Keeping what you do secret and covering up your trail.
- Keeping a growing list of reasons that justify your behaviors.
- Fantasizing about love or a sexual relationship with the person.
- Giving or receiving personal gifts.
- Planning to spend time alone together or letting it happen.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee Assistance and Work/Life Program can help through a variety of resources. Call your Employee Assistance and Work/Life Program at **1 866 468-9461** or visit shepellfgi.com.

Severing the ties

People often find ending an emotional affair is easier said than done. That's because committed relationships involve reality while emotional affairs involve fantasies and dreams... and giving up on a fantasy can be tough.

If you find yourself on the slippery slope towards an emotional affair, what can you do to regain your balance?

- **Take responsibility – even if there has been no physical contact.** Denying it or blaming it on your partner's inattentiveness will prevent you from refocusing on your partner.
- **Ask yourself why you got so involved.** Is your marriage floundering? Do you need to work on your self-esteem? Knowing why you became so involved in the first place will help you resolve underlying issue(s) and avoid falling into another emotional affair down the road.
- **The affair must end.** Yes, it hurts. And no, it's not possible to disengage partway and still be friends. It can be tricky if the relationship is with a work colleague though. In such cases, keep all future interactions strictly professional and to an absolute minimum.
- **Direct all the energy you were putting into your emotional affair back into your primary relationship.** Spend more time with your partner and if there are problems, seek counseling. Your Employee Assistance and Work/Life Program can help you access a counselor in your area.

Playing safe

So how do you avoid repeating the same mistake in the future?

- **Monitor your relationship.** If there is something missing, try to fix it. Assess whether your mutual needs are being met.
- **Value the intimacy of your relationship.** Reveal as much of yourself to one another as possible. You'll find it less necessary to form an intimate friendship with someone else.
- **Stay alert to temptations.** Be very careful of getting involved in the first place. Once you are past a certain point of emotional connection, it is very hard to go into reverse.
- **Don't flirt.** That is how affairs start. Flirting is not part of an innocent friendship. If you think there might be a problem with someone you flirt with, there probably *is* a problem.
- **Recognize your danger zones.** For some it could be the workplace, where there are opportunities to take coffee breaks or lunches with the same person all the time. For others, social networking sites may provide a sense of safety because you're behind a computer screen and exchanges can be private. Learn to recognize and limit situations and behaviors that could contribute to an emotional affair.

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BALANCE

A wellness update for your work, health, life

Noticing when you're having relationship problems is easy, but it can be more difficult to figure out why. Sit down with your partner and talk candidly about your feelings and concerns. Avoid dwelling on the past and identify what can be done to improve your relationship for the future. Counseling can also help resolve the underlying issues that may prevent you from being truly happy. If you're having any doubts, this will help you figure out if you should stay and work it out, or move on. Working through relationship problems can actually help you build a stronger, better partnership based on mutual love, trust and commitment.

Resources:

B.A. Steffens and R.L. Rennie, "The Traumatic Nature of Disclosure for Wives of Sexual Addicts," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 13: 247-67.

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