

Marital Infidelity - Are Cyber-Affairs Infidelity? Are Internet Relationships Cheating?

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Cyber-affairs seems to have evolved as the descriptive term for online affairs, cyber-affairs, online flirtations, or online sex talk. Is it infidelity? Cyber-affairs, which encompasses all the above descriptors, is an online emotional (or sexual) affair when there is no physical contact between the participants. Regardless of the terminology that you use, online affairs are not just online friendships. They are relationships that are, or have become inappropriate. Even though the two people involved have never met in real life, it can be extremely damaging to a marriage or a committed relationship.

Marriage has at its core an intimate bond that involves trust, acceptance, commitment, mutual respect, and love. Affairs, cyber or otherwise, tears at the very fiber of this bond. Marriage takes a lot of effort. It is hard work. It takes time and emotional energy to stay attached to your partner in a hectic, hard-paced world. It takes a lot of patience and kindness to listen to same complaint about a coworker as the one you heard yesterday and the day before. It takes courage to reveal something about yourself that you fear your partner will criticize. Sometimes it becomes difficult to discuss conflicts and to work on solving problems when you have tried to resolve these same issues many times without success.

Effective communication/problem solving and emotional investments in intimate sharing are probably not happening when one of the partners are engaging in a cyber-affair. The unfaithful partner is investing his/her emotions, energy, time, and risks in a fantasy relationship that allows them to be whoever they want to be. They are investing in this relationship for emotional or sexual fulfillment. They are having some of their needs met online. They may feel free to say things or suggest things online that they would not say or suggest to their spouse.

They don't have the emotional baggage of the marriage to contend with, when flirting or talking about themselves to this stranger. Since they don't know this other person and have no history with them, they are not privy to the other person's negative characteristics and foibles. The cheating partner can begin to make comparisons between the fantasy person in his/her head and the spouse at home with all his/her annoying features and relationship baggage. The cheating partner may be talking about his/her relationship with the spouse, revealing intimate details of their relationship. Any faithful spouse would feel betrayed by this alone.

The cheating partner who is revealing details about himself/herself to the other person is investing emotionally in the online affair rather than in their own marriage. It robs the intimacy from the marriage. Although there may be unresolved marital intimacy issues, choosing to get one's own intimacy needs met extramaritally, dooms the primary relationship to failure. Any concerns, feelings, fears, ambitions, and sexual needs that a

partner may be having should be discussed and worked through in the marriage, not online with a fantasy surrogate. Doing this online is distracting and dishonest.

Any cheating involves secrecy and dishonesty. Online cheating might involve hiding internet accounts and clearing out viewing history, or using the computer at odd hours or at work. As the online relationship evolves, it might involve new cell phones, hidden credit card charges, unaccounted-for time. As it continues to evolve, it can involve the two people meeting in real life, and a physical, sexual affair beginning.

Cyber-affairs are serious. They can lead to physical infidelity. They can lead to divorce. People who are cheating get defensive as you try to discover what is going on. As you ask questions about their activity, they will lie. In the face of obvious physical evidence, they will still lie.

If you plan to confront your spouse, you don't have to get into an argument with them about what they are or are not doing. Saying what you think and your feelings about it is appropriate. Telling your partner what you want him/her to do about it is also appropriate. Saying something like the following is a good way to broach the subject without accusations, arguments, and getting into a "no-win" situation.

"When I see you staying up until 2:00 a.m. on the internet and I believe that you're getting emotionally more and more distant, I think that you are having a relationship online. When I think these things I feel scared, hurt and lonely. I want you to let me know when you are online so that I can see what you are doing. I want us to set aside some time to spend with each other when we are not tired and cranky. I want"

Talk about how you feel and what you want. Do not get into arguments about what you think is going on and any evidence that you think you may have. The cheating spouse will lie in the face of overwhelming evidence and the spouse often wonders if s/he is the crazy one. If there is no cyber-affair, the other person will change their behavior to reassure you. Request behavior change. Defensiveness on the part of the person having the cyber-affair is a strong indicator that your suspicions are correct.

If you are the betrayed spouse, don't deny your feelings to yourself. Feel what you feel. Talk about it. Get help. Get counseling by yourself if your spouse won't go.

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