

# Internet Infidelity

*It doesn't take a physical act to betray your vows*

Randy Frame | posted 9/12/2008

*"Now that [my wife] has met people on [the Internet] and started to flirt, I am starting to feel deeply hurt. An unbearable feeling of jealousy is gripping my heart and distracting me from my own daily life. Work, friends and household are all affected. She laughs it off by saying nothing will come of it—it's only innocent conversation. I can't help but question, 'If it is so innocent, why are my feelings so deep?'"*

*"I have fallen for an unsung hero online. It started one day when I was at my wits' end after an argument with my husband. I went online to vent, and a man was there with a sensitive ear and big heart. As time went by we would run into each other here and there online. Pretty soon we were looking for each other. Next, I was calling him to hear his voice. I have confided in this man the very intimacies of my marriage. I have given a stranger the capability of blowing my marriage apart with a phone call."*

These laments are not fictional. They are actual postings found on online message boards. And they testify to a new, and growing, threat to the stability of marriages: the Internet.

According to Indianapolis-based marriage and family counselor Tim Gardner, Internet infidelity is far more widespread than people realize. "From what I see coming through my office," he says, "I think we're just seeing the tip of the iceberg."

## **The Big Attraction**

Why are Internet relationships so alluring—even to people who would not otherwise pursue an extramarital affair? While the answer varies from person to person, author and counselor Willard Harley says part of the attraction is that Internet communication meets two universal needs of men and women. According to Harley's research, conversation—especially conversation with a male—ranks among the top two emotional needs for most women and the Internet readily fills this need. Men, on the other hand, with their strong need for sex, are prone to surf the Net in search of women who will exchange sexual messages.

According to Gardner, mid-life crises also account for some men's predisposition to Internet relationships. "Feelings of inadequacy—the same reason men get hair transplants or buy fancy sports cars—also can open the door to an Internet affair," he says. "When a man finds a woman who tells him he is desirable, an emotional connection is inevitable."

Finally, says Gardner, people get involved in online affairs for the same reasons people have always engaged in extramarital affairs: They are trying to meet needs that are not being met within their marriages.

Complicating the problem are the addictive tendencies brought to the surface by computer technology, particularly the Internet. Many users find themselves captivated by the interactivity and the colorful graphics. Computers keep things simple, convenient, and private. In fact, articles have been written on addictions to computer solitaire—a compulsion that was unheard of when solitaire was played with a deck of cards. But solitaire is far from the only addictive activity. Both men and women have become addicted to chat-room discussions on sex.

"As with other addictions, people often don't realize they're addicted until they try to stop," explains Gary Oliver, an author and marriage counselor in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. "I've worked

with people involved in Internet relationships who knew the situation wasn't healthy, and yet when they tried to stop they found it difficult."

According to Oliver, the addiction to illicit relationships on the Net bears a similarity to sexual addictions. Both forms of addiction revolve around fantasy. Both rob a marriage of the spouse's attention, drain his or her energy, decrease clear communication and involve deception of one's self and one's spouse. Worse, indulging such an addiction leads to an escalation of frequency, intensity and duration.

### **But It's Not Physical**

According to Gardner, many people involved in destructive Internet relationships don't seek counseling because they don't see anything wrong with what they're doing. "A lot of people believe that as long as a relationship is not physically consummated, it can't be considered adultery," he says. "But I maintain that infidelity begins at the point of a strong emotional connection. When someone has a heightened emotional awareness and a sexual longing for somebody other than their mate, it's bound to have a negative effect on a marriage."

The Internet, however, makes infidelity readily accessible. A person no longer has to sneak out of the house and fear being seen by friends, colleagues or fellow church members. Inevitably, the privacy of Internet communication inhibits the participants' capacity to acknowledge and address their problems.

"The big lie at the root of most, if not all, extramarital affairs is that things would be different if only the person had married someone else," says Gardner. "I've counseled enough people to know it's not true—people on their second or third marriage soon find out that the new spouse has the same problems as the old one."

Harley maintains that people are deluding themselves if they think the voids in their marriages can be met through Internet relationships. For one thing, he says, "people have fun creating personalities for themselves, reinventing themselves through Internet communication. You can never be sure if the person on the other end really is who he or she seems to be."

But even if people are being honest, Internet exchanges constitute a poor barometer for whether a relationship can truly work. "Communication by e-mail is effortless," he explains. "When two people are physically together, the dynamics are much more real. Communication takes place through what they see. Even when they talk on the telephone, they can hear the other person's tone of voice and vocal expressions. But e-mail is one-dimensional. All you have to worry about are the words themselves, and even they can be corrected before they go out."

Clearly, the best way to avoid infidelity is to build a solid marriage. But Gardner points out that an imperfect marriage is no justification for embarking on an affair. An affair, he says, only complicates matters by bringing pain to one or both spouses. Also, it prevents a couple from solving problems as they should be solved—through communication, hard work, and, if necessary, counseling.

According to Harley, if the illicit relationship includes elements of addictive behavior, the first step toward solving the problem is to separate from the source of the addiction.

"I tell people simply to turn off their computers—or drop their Internet connection—for at least six months as a first step," he advises. The next step is to identify what is missing in the marriage and make an effort to fill those gaps in a healthy way.

For those marriages already damaged by an Internet affair, Gary Oliver says the steps to rebuilding will vary based on the longevity and strength of the marriage as well as whether the online couple ever actually met each other. In all cases, he says, there must be an admission of the problem, with confession and forgiveness, plus a system of accountability.

However, the most reliable medicine is prevention. "The best safeguards against infidelity are a close walk with the Lord, intimacy with Christ and a strong marriage characterized by time in the Word together and shared prayer," explains Oliver. "Beyond that, I strongly urge couples to communicate openly, so one partner or the other will be able to sense when there is a disturbance in the relationship."

As most couples know, creating and maintaining a solid marriage is hard work. But the effort required pales in comparison to the pain that results from infidelity—whether it's in person or over the Internet.

### **Avoid the Electronic Snare**

The Internet has made pornography and fantasy relationships more convenient, and more anonymous, than ever before. But by using common sense and a few technological safeguards, you can avoid the snare of Internet infidelity.

1. Set up your online computer in an open area of your home.
2. Don't cruise the Internet when you are tired, lonely or feeling misunderstood.
3. Have a specific destination in mind whenever you go online.
4. Turn off the instant message system (if you use America Online), and utilize parental control tools and filtering software to block so-called adult sites, news groups and certain chat rooms.
5. Remove your personal profile from online services to minimize your chances of attracting pornographic e-mail.
6. Recognize that conversing with strangers online steals time and energy from your marriage. Limit Internet usage to predetermined tasks, and spend more time with your spouse.
7. Talk to a trusted friend about your temptations and failures. Ask that person to hold you accountable.
8. If you are overly susceptible to Internet trysts or online pornography, cancel your Internet access.

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