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, neighbour, 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 behaviour 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 behaviours are appropriate and which ones aren't. The rule should be that if you can't tell your partner everything about your online behaviour, 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 behaviour 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 counsellor, 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.