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 behaviours.
- 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.

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 counselling. Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) can help you access a counsellor 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 behaviours that could contribute to an emotional affair.

Noticing when you're having relationship problems is easy, but it can 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. Counselling 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.