

Ask a psychotherapist

Question: I read your answers about pornography with interest but my problem is different. I felt something was wrong because my husband was spending way more time than usual on the computer. He refused to tell me what he was doing and got kind of angry. This made me more worried and I'm ashamed to say I snooped. I found out that he's regularly 'chatting' and flirting with a couple of women on line. When I confronted him, he said it was for fun and nothing to get upset about because he's never going to meet these women. But I feel like he's cheating on me. Who's right?

Answer: In this day of easy Internet access, there are many new ways to cheat or betray a partner's trust. Sites that encourage faceless flirting and dating are among these. A simple way of determining whether any activity is a form of cheating or betrayal is to consider whether it interferes with a couple's sense of connection or intimacy. Most secrets, even non-romantic ones, do that to begin with. Unless a couple can be upfront with one another about on-line chatting and flirting with others, that is, if it is an activity with which both partners can be comfortable a divide will inevitably be created in the couple by one partner's need for secrecy. And it is the rare couple who feel at ease about allowing one another to engage in outside flirtations, even virtual ones.

In my experience, when one partner begins to seek excitement or comfort outside of their relationship it signals a fundamental problem or problems in that relationship. The answer is to address these problems, perhaps with the help of a couple therapist, rather than to triangulate new people in. That is what happens when one partner has an affair; essentially, there are now three people in the relationship. This is true of virtual relationships too, even if the people never meet.

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