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Ask a psychotherapist

Question: I think I'm going nuts ? either that or my wife is! We've been married 11 years, two kids, and I've never cheated but I know she's always going through my cellphone looking for ?evidence?. She's always hated the women I work with ? if she hears me talking with any of them, she accuses me of flirting or worse. She opens my mail and questions all my purchases, especially who I had lunches with. I feel like I'm under surveillance all the time and I haven't done anything wrong! What's the problem here and what can I do to get her off my back?

Answer: I hear the frustration in your question. It's very difficult to live contentedly with someone who clearly doesn't trust you and who is willing to violate your privacy in order to seek evidence that you have betrayed them. This can be especially galling when there has been no history of betrayal in the form of outside affairs (real or cyber) in the relationship.

Your question suggests that your wife has always felt somewhat insecure about your faithfulness to her. Unless she has a history of betrayals by unfaithful partners in the past which would make her understandably wary, she may be experiencing a certain degree of paranoia ? fear that dreadful things may have already happened or be about to happen despite a lack of concrete evidence.

Paranoia can show up as a symptom in a number of conditions, including schizophrenia. It is also the central component of Paranoid Personality Disorder. Unlike other personality types in which symptoms can manifest mildly as a style, more seriously as marked traits or in the extreme as a true personality disorder, the spectrum for paranoid disorders starts with Paranoid Personality Disorder at the mild end and ends with the frank psychosis associated with Paranoid Schizophrenia at the other extreme.

People with Paranoid Personality Disorder believe their own fantasies and are usually not amenable to reason. They tend to be black and white thinkers. Many have extensive histories of hostility and conflict with both family members and colleagues for which they are unable to accept any responsibility. They feel an absolute need to be in control, especially of their partners.

Along with pathological jealousy and suspicion of others' motives, a person with this disorder is quick to anger and to retaliate for perceived slights. They're often too suspicious of a psychotherapist's intentions and loyalties to engage productively in individual therapy let alone couple therapy in which they almost inevitably misperceive an alliance of the therapist and the partner against them.

If you think that you your wife is seriously paranoid, I urge you to seek counselling for yourself. People with paranoia can become dangerous emotionally, financially and physically. An experienced psychotherapist can help you decide whether you or your children are at risk.

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