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Cheating in a wired world

The couple — a pair of 28-year-olds, married for nine years — arrived at therapist Katherine Hertlein's office to discuss Internet infidelity. The wife had discovered hundreds of e-mail messages her husband had exchanged with another woman. The messages were intensely personal.

On the car ride home after their first counseling session, the husband pulled out his Blackberry and began texting his virtual confidant. He typed, "I love you." She quickly learned the truth of the text and it became the subject of the couple's next therapy session.

Hertlein, PhD, LMFT, who is also an assistant professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and has published several articles on Internet infidelity, confronted the man at that second session.

"Dude, really," she remembers saying, referencing the offending text message. "I'm trying to help you out here."

He shrugged, rolled his eyes and said, "I know."

Most couples have a clear understanding of what constitutes cheating in the real world. Informal lunches with a co-worker are OK, but dinner at a restaurant with white tablecloths is a no-no. Flirtation may be acceptable, but kissing and other sexual acts are strictly verboten.

"Infidelity in the real world is defined by physical interaction with another person," Hertlein says. "The Internet definition [of cheating] is more broad."

Internet infidelity can take lots of different forms: Secret texting, illicit e-mails, intimate instant messages, frank discussion of sexual subject matter, viewing of pornographic websites without the partner's knowledge or using other high-tech devices such as video chatting and Facebook.

But not everyone views Internet infidelity the same way.

One person might view the online activity as harmless fun. But that person's partner may see

How the Internet has redefined infidelity

it as a major betrayal of trust in the relationship.

In the case of Hertlein's clients, the husband defended his actions this way: "We never met in a hotel, so it doesn't

mean anything," he said. "Nothing ever happened."

His wife didn't buy that explanation. To her, the deep emotional connection her husband had with another woman constituted cheating.

Defining online infidelity

Couples aren't the only ones unsure about how to define online cheating.

According to a 2006 article by Hertlein and Fred Piercy, PhD, a professor at Virginia

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Easy access to technology makes Internet infidelity more prevalent.
Photo by Amanky, courtesy of Flickr

Internet Infidelity

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“Therapists struggle with the definition of Internet infidelity.”
— Katherine Hertlein and Ron Feintech



Katherine Hertlein

Polytechnic Institute and State University, “therapists struggle with the definition of Internet infidelity.” Titled “Internet Infidelity: A Critical Review of the Literature,” the article was published in *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy For Couples and Families*.

Although exact definitions differ, two attributes remained consistent: Secrecy and sexual chemistry. Passwords and emptying caches on a computer’s web browser make maintaining online secrecy relatively easy. Like real world cheating, secrecy may also add to the excitement of an online relationship.

“Most researchers also mention sexual chemistry in their definition of Internet infidelity,” write Hertlein and Piercy. “That is, most participants feel sexual in a medium that makes it relatively easy to flirt or share sexual fantasies online.”

That doesn’t mean emotional connections aren’t important. In a 2003 study of 1,117 participants, “sharing deep emotional and/or intimate information online” was considered a breach of a long-term romantic relationship by more people than visiting a strip club or viewing pornography.

The study, titled “Pushing the Wrong Buttons: Men’s And Women’s Attitudes toward Online and Offline Infidelity,” by Monica Whitty, PhD, reader in psychology at Nottingham Trent University in England, found that participants defined the most egregious acts of infidelity as “sexual intercourse,” “cybersex regularly with the same person,” “hot chat regularly with the same person,” “cybersex regularly with strangers,” “cybersex with a stranger — just the once,” “hot chat regularly with strangers” and “hot chat with a stranger — just the once.”

In a discussion of the findings, which were published in *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, Whitty asks, “What does this mean about individuals’ perception of infidelity?”

Whitty’s response to her own query: “It is perhaps not the amount of physical contact or the idea that one’s partner is masturbating, but rather that their partner has desire for another and is seeking out a sexual encounter with an individual other than themselves.”

Researchers have identified seven factors that contribute to Internet infidelity:

- *anonymity* — online communication allows users to assert an idealized version of themselves;
- *accessibility* — computers and smart phones are ubiquitous;
- *affordability* — the cost of participation is relatively low;
- *approximation* — the Internet mimics real world communication, i.e., IM chats;
- *acceptability* — online communication is increasingly the social norm;
- *ambiguity* — it’s unclear what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior; and
- *accommodation* — the difference between one’s real and ideal self.

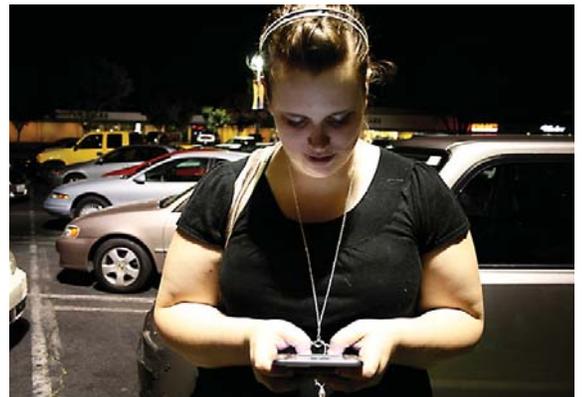
In 1998, Al Cooper, PhD, a California academic, identified the first three factors — “anonymity,” “accessibility” and “affordability” — as a “Triple-A engine” that powered sexual discovery on the Internet. Other researchers added “affordability” and “approximation.” More recently, Hertlein and Armeda Stevenson of Florida State University suggested “ambiguity” and “accommodation” as meaningful terms to help understand romantic online interactions.

Tips for therapists

About two-thirds of the couples seeking treatment from Ron Feintech, PhD, a licensed psychologist in Portland, Maine, are grappling with Internet infidelity issues.

Feintech became an AASECT-certified sex therapist in 1978. Back in those days, the most commonly complained about form of non-physical infidelity was when a woman found her husband’s stash of *Playboy* or *Hustler* magazines in the family garage.

Even so, the dynamics were similar. Couples often arrive at therapy in the roles of “perpetrator” (the person viewing pornography or engaged in an online relationship) and “victim” (the aggrieved spouse). The “perpetrator” some-



Texting is popular for friendship and flirtation. Photo by ex.libris, courtesy of Flickr



Ron Feintech

times feels a sense of shame; the “victim” often displays a sense of moral outrage.

“The ‘victim’ sometimes goes ballistic attempting to extract a pound of flesh,” Feintech says.

That doesn’t help resolve the dispute. So Feintech attempts to ease each person out of these roles so they can see the underlying troubles that

contributed to the online action that one or both partners define as infidelity.

“I want to help them examine the dynamics of the relationship in a sophisticated way,” he says. “They co-created the conditions that made [the Internet infidelity] possible.”

In one recent case, Feintech recalls that the online infidelity was G-rated, but emotionally powerful. The female partner had been writing and receiving long, thoughtful e-mails with someone she met online. Those e-mails were more intimate than the relationship with her real-life partner. After months of therapy, she refused to end the online relationship.

“It was enough to blow the marriage out of the water,” Feintech says.

Luckily, many relationships involving online disputes can be resolved. In a workshop at the 2010 AASECT conference, Hertlein cited five errors therapists should avoid when counseling couples involved in an Internet infidelity:

• *Assuming the identified patient/involved partner is addicted to the computer or sex.* “Just because a computer is involved doesn’t mean it’s an addiction,” Hertlein says. In a 1999 study, only about 8 percent of people surveyed spent more than 11 hours engaged in online sexual pursuits.



Smartphones make staying in touch easier. Photo by Kurt Komoda, courtesy of Flickr

• *Assuming a woman who cheats online is more pathological than a man.* Women are just as technologically savvy as men and their rates of physical infidelity in marriage are almost as high.

• *Treating a second-order change problem from a first-order perspective.* In the case of Internet infidelity, some therapists may suggest moving the computer out of a home office to a more public space of the house. This is a mistake, Hertlein argues, because computers and smart phones are everywhere these days.

• *Not having a clear definition of the problem.* There’s no substitute for a comprehensive evaluation that includes an examination of physical (alcohol, caffeine), emotional (childhood, etc.) and sexual (other relationships and this relationship) factors.

• *Not considering the ‘self-of-therapist’ in your work.* In other words, beware of personal bias. “Sexual issues in treatment are inherently value-laden,” Hertlein writes, “and may be one area where self-of-therapist issues may affect treatment, regardless of whether one is aware of them.”

Unique characteristics of online relationships

One reason people are seeking friendship online — and perhaps more — is because it’s just so darn easy to meet others that way.

“The Internet allows more access to more people,” says Tammy Nelson, PhD, an AASECT-certified sex therapist. “People are e-mailing and texting in rapid-fire succession. They are seeking immediate gratification.”

That’s not how relationships were formed 20 years ago. In the pre-Internet era, couples flirted in person and hooked up face-to-face.

“In the past, they had to meet after work or on business trips,” Nelson says. “Now they can do it in bed with a laptop with their [partner] lying next to them.”

Yolanda Turner, MCAT, EdD, an assistant professor at Eastern University in St. Davids, Penn., agrees.

“It brings the person you’re having an affair with into your house,” Turner says. “They are right there with you. The level of anxiety around the affair is heightened because of the ubiquitousness.”

Turner, who also teaches a course at Pennsylvania’s Widener University called “Sexuality and the Internet,” says online relationships also have other unique attributes.

People involved in intimate texting, chatting or instant messaging often imagine an idealized lover. “I have filled in the blanks in my head,” Turner says, analyzing the situation from the point-of-

“In the past, [couples] had to meet after work or on business trips. Now they can do it in bed with a laptop with their [partner] lying next to them.”

— Tammy Nelson

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view of a person with an online affair. “They have become almost the perfect person. They touch me exactly the way I want to be touched and look at me the way I want to be looked at.”

Another aspect of online cheating that’s different than real world cheating is how the former turns the partner into a sleuth. After an Internet infidelity is discovered, suddenly every e-mail and text message becomes suspect.

The importance of couple communication

Many of these problems could have been avoided had couples discussed online behavior at an early stage in the relationship.

In an article published earlier this year in *Psychotherapy Networker* titled “The New Monogamy,” Nelson explores couples explicit and implicit monogamy contracts. She writes: “The implicit monogamy agreement or understanding between the couple is different from the spoken, explicit monogamy agreement and may never be discussed at all.”

If each partner has the same implicit monogamy agreement, they may avoid conflict. But if they define it differently, problems may arise.

In the case of Internet infidelity, couples may



Yolanda Turner

find themselves arguing about porn or online relationships because they haven’t openly discussed what constitutes cheating. Is it acceptable to text an attractive co-worker personal details about one’s life? How intimate is too intimate? Is it OK to view porn online? Is one’s Second Life avatar permitted to engage in virtual sex?

Getting couples to talk about acceptable online behavior is an important step towards renewing trust. Of course, so is treating the root cause of the unhappy main relationship, which likely sparked one or both partners to seek online alternatives.

In addition, Turner says it’s vitally important to understand how people are communicating online. It’s also vital to understand what happens in chat rooms, texting on smart phones, G-mail messaging and so on.

Says Turner, “My clients are relieved to find a therapist who doesn’t have to be taught about the Internet during treatment.”

— Todd Melby

“My clients are relieved to find a therapist who doesn’t have to be taught about the Internet during treatment.”

— Yolanda Turner

How to contact AASECT board members

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