



HOW IS CYBER INFIDELITY DIFFERENT FROM INFIDELITY?

Isn't all infidelity the same? While there are some aspects that are similar between cyber infidelity and infidelity, such as broken trust, there are some important differences. Infidelity commonly takes place outside of the home. The initial meeting and subsequent contacts are in person and face-to-face. The initial meeting might be in the workplace, a gym or a bar. Follow up contacts may be by phone culminating in face-to-face contact in person.

Cyber infidelity is different in that the initial meeting often occurs in the home. Through the use of the computer, laptop, tablet, or smart phone the person is often solicited via website e-mail or social media to begin a cyber affair. The spouse or significant other may be sitting just a few feet away while the cyber affair is initiated and maintained via texting, sexting or chat. The cyber affair is often maintained in this manner without the necessity of a face to face meeting or direct physical contact. Sometimes this contributes to the denial of the offending partner believing that a cyber affair is not actually an affair because in person sex never occurred. This self deception assuages guilt and may contribute to the ongoing participation in multiple cyber affairs.

A useful analogy is to that of bullying. Before the age of the internet, social media and the smart phone, a child would actually have to go to school in order to experience bullying in the schoolyard or the cafeteria. Today, children are terrorized in their own homes through these technological methods.

Similarly, today an individual never has to leave the home in order to cheat on a partner. Cyber technology has benefited a great many people. Many wonderful relationships have begun and are maintained through the use of this technology. We must also recognize the drawbacks and liabilities. New models of treatment are needed to address the dark side that this technology poses to relationships.



SEXUAL ADDICTION OR OUT OF CONTROL SEXUAL BEHAVIOR?

It is very common that the person that has engaged in cyber infidelity presenting at the office of a psychologist or a sex therapist has already been labeled as a sex addict. The label may have come from the wounded partner, internet searches, or television. It has become a self label. The person is typically desperate and on the verge of losing a marriage or significant relationship. Anxiety is high, sometimes accompanied by depression. Because the person's behavior has been destructive and has felt out of control he or she assumes that he or she is a sexual addict. The label sexual addict creates shame and is sometimes used as a synonym for pervert or degenerate. These labels tend to be destructive and damaging psychologically to the individual and ultimately to the relationship that is trying to survive.

By recognizing the behavior that led to and maintained the cyber infidelity as out of control sexual behavior the individual is not pathologized or labeled in a negative and self condemning way. Instead of being shamed the person is empowered to recognize that sexual behavior is a choice. Choosing wellness and healthy sexual behaviors that are self-determined becomes the goal. By working collaboratively in treatment a personal guide to sexual behavior based on the preferences and choices of the individual is constructed. Both risk factors and protective factors are identified as part of the treatment plan. Risk factors are avoided and protective factors are enhanced. The resulting empowerment creates hope and confidence.



MECHANISMS THAT SUPPORT CYBER INFIDELITY

The Internet, social media, and the smart phone have been the three key developments that have led to cyber infidelity. Today the smart phone is ubiquitous. It has become rare to see an adult, teenager, or even a child without a smart phone or tablet in hand. The acronym AAAP is an easy way to remember the key elements that make the smart phone the primary device that supports cyber infidelity.

- A Accessibility
- A Affordability
- A Anonymity
- P Portability

Today people have easy access to online pornography. Social media provides the opportunity to connect with people that we might otherwise never meet. Various types of smart phones have become more affordable to many people. Use of the Internet provides an opportunity to remain anonymous or disguise identity. Finally, the smart phone has added the feature of portability. It fits in your pocket and can go anywhere. Taken in combination these factors have contributed to and in fact created the new category of infidelity which we call cyber infidelity.



HOW CAN YOU MEND A BROKEN HEART?

The challenge of restoring trust shattered by cyber infidelity

Of the many challenges that must be faced in the effort to heal a relationship damaged by cyber infidelity, perhaps the most daunting is that of the restoration of trust. The wounded partner is devastated by the betrayal. The resulting loss of faith in the relationship creates a feeling of being lost at sea. Beyond the great hurt that the person feels is a sense of having lost reality. The feeling of certainty and reliability is gone. As hard as it is to no longer believe in the relationship, even more devastating can be the self-doubt and lost confidence in personal judgment. The person no longer has confidence in what they thought they knew about their partner, their relationship, and sometimes about life itself.

The model of trust that most people follow when embarking upon a new love relationship is that of blind faith or blind trust. A wonderful feeling of confidence in knowing that there is a person with whom I can depend upon and who has my back in life tends to accompany the feeling of romantic love. This feeling contributes to a sense of personal security and well-being. When trust has been broken the blind faith or blind trust model no longer works. As a result, the wounded partner has no way forward. Even if the person very much wants to salvage the relationship, he or she no longer has a model of trust to rely upon. Even daring to trust again can cause the wounded partner to feel foolish. Sometimes well intended support from family and friends can reinforce this doubt.

The evidence-based model of restoring trust is a way forward.

The evidence-based model of trust is a way to regain a sense of reality, confidence, and to slowly restore trust in the relationship that has been damaged by cyber infidelity. By working collaboratively with Dr. Kanaris and the offending partner, methods of transparency and cooperation are taught and developed. Transparency and even the voluntary limitation of the use of technologies such as the Internet, social media, tablets and smart phones is fostered. A team approach is created. Conflict is reduced as the adversary is seen as cyber infidelity and not each other. Slowly, the realistic and evidence-based trust is generated and enhanced. The blind faith or blind trust model is discarded. The old relationship is mourned and gradually the new one is celebrated.



HOW CAN THE WOUND OF THE BETRAYED PARTNER BE HEALED?

Cyber infidelity creates profound hurt and a deep emotional wound on the part of the betrayed partner. It levels a terrible blow to self esteem. A sense of inadequacy and inferiority can be created or exacerbated. Vulnerabilities and body image are worsened. Childhood insecurities are raised and inflamed. Feelings of sexual inadequacy can develop. Anxiety, panic, insomnia, loss of appetite or excessive appetite, loss of joy, depression and overall emotional liability may develop.

The therapeutic approach consists of both identifying and validating this profound wound. The person needs to be helped to understand that while they may not be the cause of the problem their constructive participation in the treatment process is vital to the solution of the problem. Their thoughts and feelings must be understood and validated not just by the therapist, but also by the offending partner. The offending partner must show complete tolerance, acceptance, and understanding of the harm that's been caused. Tolerance for the roller coaster of emotion that will unfold and the repetitive questions about the cyber affair must be demonstrated time and time again. Acceptance of responsibility, tolerance, and even providing support in the face of the wounded partner's anger and lashing out behaviors must be demonstrated. By using this collaborative team approach over time the wound will heal. The emotional scar may remain, but the wound will heal.



RECOVERY FROM CYBER INFIDELITY: ANGER VS VINDICTIVENESS

One of the emotions that the wounded partner commonly feels following the discovery of cyber infidelity is anger. While there is a range of emotions commonly experienced, anger can be one of the most challenging. Lashing out verbally and venting feelings of rage toward the offending partner is both common and even necessary. Suppressing this feeling in an effort to be overly restrained can lead to a form of denial that interferes with healing.

While the experience of and the expression of anger is both healthy and necessary, when it crosses the line toward vindictive behavior it can be destructive. It can be harmful to the well-being of the wounded partner and damaging to the healing process for the relationship. The vindictive behavior often takes the form of threats such as threatening to tell people at the job of the offending partner. Sometimes threats to tell friends, family members, and particularly children of the couple are made. These threats only serve to create more distance, distrust and alienation. So the take away message for the wounded partner attempting to recover from cyber infidelity, when it comes to anger, is express it, vent it and know that you are entitled to feel it. If, however, your behavior crosses the line toward vindictiveness, work on your self control so as not to make the situation worse. Facilitate recovery by the appropriate feeling and expression of anger, but don't damage it with vindictive behaviors.

How should I react to my partner's anger?

It is very important for the offending partner to demonstrate genuine tolerance, acceptance, and understanding of the anger that their partner expresses. People that respond with impatience, self-serving upset, or intolerance of the partner's anger invalidate the feeling. This serves to hurt the wounded partner further and contributes to the feeling of rage. The invalidation tends to be received by the wounded partner as a statement that "he doesn't get it." It increases the feeling of vulnerability on the part of the wounded partner and impedes the healing process.

It is very important to validate the anger of the wounded partner. Supportive statements such as, "You have a right to be angry. If I were in your place I would be angry too," are helpful. If the wounded partner's rage goes over the line toward vindictive behaviors that might include a variety of threats to expose the cyber infidelity to friends, family members, children or the offending partner's job, then a different sort of response is needed. It is recommended that the offending partner just listen to what is being said. Once the rageful partner begins to calm down, again reaffirming and validating the anger is important. This, however, can be followed by a statement emphasizing that vindictive behaviors, while understandable, are ultimately destructive for everyone involved and hurtful to recovery and reconciliation.



COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT CYBER INFIDELITY

1. It must be a bad marriage/relationship.

While it is true that in some instances cyber infidelity is a result of a problem in a relationship or within an individual, it is often the case that it occurs in a good and fully functioning relationship. The intrusive and sometimes insidious nature of our technologies from the smart phone to social media can create a crisis in a relationship where otherwise none would exist.

2. It is impossible to overcome the trauma that results from cyber infidelity.

There is no doubt that cyber infidelity and overcoming its trauma can be a daunting task. There is also trauma, however, to ending a relationship or marriage. So much is on the line. Feelings, finances, family and friendships can be profoundly affected. Many people choose to take the challenge of working to save their relationship. With the right help, that is exactly what people are successfully doing. Incredibly, the process of recovery from cyber infidelity often becomes an unwanted opportunity that leads to an improved relationship.

3. Wounded partners fear that they would “feel like a fool” to take the chance of working on the relationship and risk being betrayed again.

Sometimes well-meaning friends and family discourage the wounded partner from taking a second chance. This can increase already established internal pressure that builds fear. This is where Dr. Kanaris' model for the treatment of Cyber infidelity that emphasizes evidence-based trust building over blind faith is so helpful in slowly rebuilding a basis for trust and gradually moving forward with confidence. Recovery becomes a collaboration that includes the couple and the therapist.

4. “Once a cheater always a cheater.”

This is again a difference between traditional infidelity and cyber infidelity. Traditional infidelity has typically involved concerted effort on the part of the unfaithful individual to seek out places, opportunities, and individuals with whom to cheat. While it can happen

passively, more commonly it is a result of intention and direct effort. With cyber infidelity advances usually come to the individual easily and insidiously through social media platforms. Similarly, the carrying out of the affair through text, sexting and other electronic means happens easily and secretly without having to leave the home and physically go to a hideaway or rendezvous. The spouse can be sitting a few feet away while the cyber affair is actively in progress. Without the technology many people that cheat otherwise would not.

5. The wounded partner can never recover and will always be “damaged goods.”

It is true that the wound from cyber infidelity can be deep. A person's self-esteem, self image, body image, sense of well-being and personal worth can all be profoundly affected by the trauma of cyber infidelity. Commonly, the wounded partner believes deep down that somehow it is her/his inadequacy that led to the cyber infidelity. “If only I were good enough it wouldn't have happened,” is a common refrain. Self blame, rage, anxiety, insomnia, loss of appetite and depression often result. Properly informed therapeutic support is essential in working through these feelings and coming to understand that cyber infidelity often occurs having little or nothing to do with any inadequacy of the wounded partner. In time and with the proper treatment people are able to recover their confidence and restore their self-esteem.

6. “It was only an emotional affair. It's not infidelity.”

Because cyberaffairs may not involve skin to skin touch the offender will often use a self-serving rationalization that the emotional involvement with the cyberpartner does not constitute infidelity. It is common that there are efforts to minimize the behavior and make it “no big deal.” This fails to realize and acknowledge the profound ethical violation that has been committed within the primary love relationship. The dishonesty and secrecy that typically accompanies the cyberaffair are clear signs of bad behavior. The intimacy that is established with the cyberpartner(s) is an understandable threat to the primary love partner or spouse. The proper treatment for cyber infidelity helps the offending spouse to take responsibility and for the hard truths to be addressed.

7. “Cyberaffairs are not cheating because there is no in person sex.”

This is another rationalization that attempts to minimize the offense and evade responsibility. The intimacy of a relationship is made up of more than sex. Closeness, sharing personal feelings and ideas and maintaining a clandestine or secret relationship does not have to involve sexual relations in order to violate the bond of trust that is now broken in the primary love reconciliation.



THE SEARCH FOR THE ELUSIVE “WHY?”

The most asked question probably begins with the word “why.” People are driven to know the reason for things. It is, in part, due to our natural curiosity. Often, our desire and even need to know seeks a useful understanding of something that affects us. We search for a story of explanation. It is a common way that we make sense out of our world. It is a way that we strive to develop an understanding of things, events in our lives, other people, and even ourselves. So we ask why. Sometimes, we even feel compelled to ask why so as to know the answer to an emotional question.

We like to have a clear, singular, and simple answer. Something that can effectively and efficiently resolve our discomfort with not knowing. Elaborate methods of understanding, ranging from religion to the scientific method, have largely been driven by the question “why.” Answers to this question can allow us to feel more secure. The unsteadiness of uncertainty can seem resolved. We feel better. We gain a firmer grasp on our reality by being able to hold the answer to the question “why” in our hands.

The challenge of course is that the answer to the question “why” that may comfort us is often an illusion. It’s a story that we decide to tell ourselves. It’s a story that may loosely fit the facts but may actually be inaccurate. It can be a story that is driven by emotion and constructed with self delusion for the purpose of self-defense.

“While I search for the reason why, I look for the story in your eyes. Will they reveal the truth or merely tell me more lies?”

The question that begins with why is commonly the most torturous one for the partner that has been hurt emotionally by infidelity. Often compelled to seek the answer to this question, the person’s fears and insecurities tend to fill in the blanks in distressing ways. Fears of some sort of inadequacy are dreaded as the primary answer to this question.

“Am I no longer attractive enough?”

“Am I a poor lover?”

“Have I gained too much weight?”

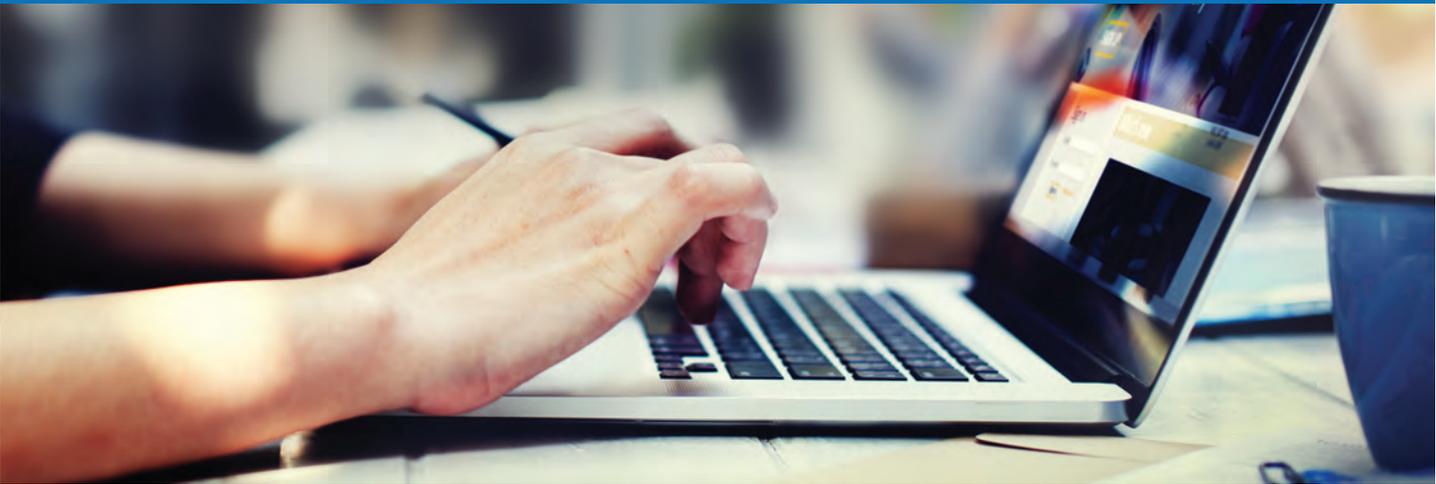
“Has aging made me unappealing?”

“Am I no longer interesting?”

“Am I unlovable?”

These and many other upsetting beliefs and fears commonly lurk behind the question “why” in the mind of the aggrieved partner. Sometimes, the factors that contribute to infidelity, particularly in the case of cyber infidelity that have little to do with inadequacies of the betrayed partner, are not even considered. The intrusive role that technology now plays in our personal lives and our relationships can have a disruptive effect wholly independent of any imagined personal inadequacy. Social media, cheaters apps, and pop up ads enticing illicit sex have entered the living rooms of most relationships. Infidelity no longer needs to be pursued or driven by sexual or relationship dissatisfaction. It can find and disrupt good relationships as well as troubled ones. Getting expert treatment that understands these factors and does not simplistically assume cyber infidelity is automatically and purely a result of personal inadequacy or a bad relationship is essential to recovery.

The challenging reality is that, like the explanation of most things, cyber infidelity requires careful expert analysis of a variety of factors that often interact in complex ways. By participating in treatment with a properly trained psychologist, both the aggrieved partner and the unfaithful partner can develop a useful and healing understanding in the collaborative pursuit of an answer to the question “why.”



Sometimes There's a Kink in the Link

One common reason that can lead to cyber infidelity is the hidden interest of the unfaithful partner in a sexual kink or fetish. This is typically interest in a sexual behavior that is relatively unusual or uncommon. However, just because it may be uncommon doesn't mean that there aren't many people that share a particular kinky sexual interest. Sometimes interest in the particular kink can be obsessive and even to the exclusion of other more common sexual behaviors or of the partner unaware of the kink. Sometimes these interests are called paraphilias. In the past the professions of psychology and sex therapy tended to pathologize sexual interests that did not lie in the main stream. Over time, we have learned that many people enjoy a diversity of sexual interests. These interests do not suggest that people who engage in them are any less mentally healthy than people who do not. One way to think about it would be comparing it to dietary appetite. Palates vary tremendously among people. All of the food on a smorgasbord is not preferred by everyone. People have their favorite dishes. This is acceptable and considered normal. Unfortunately, at the dining table of human sexuality such acceptance is not the case. Historically, there has been much disapproval and even condemnation of other than main stream sexual interests and practices. This has had the effect of driving such sexual interests underground. Only in recent years have some of these sexual practices become less stigmatized. Portrayals in the popular media like 50 Shades of Grey have created some greater acceptance of kink—in this case bondage, domination, and sadomasochism (BDSM). Such media presentations have introduced kinky sex to many people but have also helped liberate those that have secretly held these interests and practices for a long time.

Because of the bias against kinky sex, people who have held such interests have historically gone underground. This of course was in order to avoid condemnation and even abuse. In the digital age, people with a particular sexual interest have been able to find community on the Internet. Others with similar interests have become accessible and relatively easily found. While that might be good news for people that have kinky sexual interests, it has too often been bad news for traditional relationships. In effect, because of the stigma associated with kinky sexual interests, the partner that had such an interest would normally hide it. Instead of risking criticism, condemnation, and even the loss of the primary love relationship, it would stay a dark secret. The expression of the sexual interest would find acceptance and expression on the Internet. Thus, this became a path to cyber infidelity. Once discovered, it would very often lead to a crisis in the relationship. Sometimes it leads to the end of the relationship.

The good news is that there is hope for the relationship that is dealing with the sudden discovery of a kinky interest of one of the partners and even its expression through secretive cyber infidelity. A professional trained in addressing the unique complexities of the situation can provide much needed help. This help cannot only save the relationship but also usher in a new phase that can restore trust and actually enhance the intimate connection. While it's not easy, and rather emotionally challenging, the relationship can be saved and even enhanced. The treatment process involves many phases with the goal of restoring trust and improving open and honest intimate communication. Through application of the collaborative treatment model, joining the psychologist with the couple as a powerful treatment team, great progress can be achieved. There is hope. The kink does not have to break the link.



“I don’t want to be the cyber sex police, but I can’t stop checking the phone.”

This is a common lament frequently heard from wounded partners that are in treatment for cyber infidelity. While it appears simply as a distrust of the partner, it is more profoundly a lost trust of self. In life, we so often benefit from the ability to trust our gut instinct. It is essentially the ability to know without knowing, to feel confident in a decision, action or person beyond the facts of the situation. Choices made consistent with our gut feeling typically lead to feelings of comfort, peace and confidence. When we have been betrayed by the person that we trust the most, beyond the obvious emotional effects of hurt and anger, there is shock. We are shocked in part because the broken trust feels like our gut instinct has betrayed us. The earth feels shaky under our feet. We lose confidence in our own judgment. We can become indecisive, equivocating between choices. Even our sense of reality can be shaken. We wonder, “How will I ever know what I think I know and feel to be true?”

The way forward involves patience, cooperation and collaboration. Not only is it okay to check the unfaithful partners devices, but it is actually necessary. The unfaithful partner must make it okay. Complete transparency is needed. There must be no resentment, but rather cooperation. It is best for the unfaithful partner to voluntarily initiate the offer to check the phone and electric devices at anytime without resentment. In time, as progress is made the desire to check naturally and gradually subsides. The collaborative effort toward building a new model of trust proceeds. The wounded partner slowly regains confidence in their gut instinct informed by new positive and reaffirming experience. The stage is set for building evidence-based trust in the partner. This gradually develops over time. The cyber sex police leave the scene.