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Emotional Affairs: Why They Hurt So Much

One partner feels wounded; the other feels falsely accused.

Posted Jun 30, 2014

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A spouse unexpectedly walks into a room where her partner's email-in-progress is lit up on the screen. In a blink, a work email replaces the previous one. Why the abrupt switch? What is being hidden? The internet is making it possible for many to find long lost loves, relationships discarded in the past that nevertheless hold elements of remembered magic. Sometimes these email exchanges are [workplace](#) relationships or casual acquaintances that have become something more.


Initially, for former lovers, the messages back and forth tend to be updates about what has transpired in the intervening years. For workplace buddies and acquaintances, the messages amount to learning more about each other. Most of the time this is as far as it goes, but in some instances the email exchanges grow in frequency and intensity. The exchanges become more personal, turning toward intimate subjects such as what is missing from each person's [marriage](#), which longings have gone unanswered and which hopes unfulfilled. Since there are no longstanding relationships without compromises and disappointments, this kind of discussion can evolve naturally enough. Both people feel deeply seen. This other person gets it. Without the messiness of day to day life, the exchanges in this virtual relationship can gradually evolve into a special and private treat. This is when the messages start to feel like something that should be kept hidden.

Almost always, people involved in these verbal trysts maintain that if there is no physical contact then nothing threatening is going on. Yet those who stumble upon evidence of a partner's growing enchantment with such a "friend" almost always view this differently. It feels terrible to them. Someone has stepped into emotional territory previously reserved for them, to which they used to have free and exclusive access. Now there are sections of this sphere that belong to someone else, that are off-limits to them and have become *private*.

In the stories I have heard from those who feel thus betrayed, the worst aspect of making this kind of discovery is trying to talk about it with the partner. Any expression of hurt or jealousy is taken as a challenge to the partner's right to have friends outside the marriage, to have personal freedom. *It's just a [friendship](#)*. To complain about such a valuable addition to the partner's life is to be accused of being controlling, petty, and insecure. Questions about the [nature](#) of this relationship are met with defensive justifications that leave the other feeling worse. Instead of hoped-for reassurance, there is deep hurt. One friend told me he felt more alone than he ever had in his life when his wife angrily rebuffed his questions as insecurity.

In an emotional affair, it makes no difference whether the "friend" lives across the country or across the street, whether the discussions are taking place on email or in person. The problem for the partner is that a dynamic and vivacious conversation is taking place on a regular basis with someone else; whole areas of growth, insight, and soulful exploration have come to be located outside the marriage. I know of one woman who became increasingly uncomfortable with her husband's "friendship" with a neighbor. At first, the two ran into each other occasionally when they walked their dogs each evening. Over time, they made sure they did their dog-walking at the same time. One night, the wife decided to go along when it was time to walk the dog. Her husband complained afterward about having had to shift back into "regular neighbor conversation" with the neighbor. When she said his reaction wounded her, he raged at her for interfering in their "harmless" routine.

The greatest injury comes from these episodes of getting angry at one's partner for feeling threatened, e.g. insisting that the relationship is harmless after a partner has just described immense hurt. Whose reality gets to be respected here? Who decides? A corrosive cycle can ensue in which the partner's misery is experienced as



Getting out of one of these cycles is tricky. Within the couple, the only person with the power to resolve the dilemma is the person who doesn't want to take a closer look at it. This would require forcing oneself to care more about the partner's suffering than one's own enhancement, an ever more elusive strategy because the "friendship" becomes more compelling over time. The chief motivation for giving up such a recurring and expansive pleasure would be to protect one's marriage, but this motivation gets replaced by the much more palatable conceptual frame of standing up for one's freedom and for one's rights as an individual.

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The surest way out of this paradox is honest self-examination: "Why does this relationship mean so much to me? What would be missing from my life if I let it go?" The rewards of the "friendship" contain important clues – something to look forward to, feeling deeply understood, filling up a void during a time of transition, the novelty of a fresh perspective, the aliveness of a kind of romance. Feeling re-awakened on so many levels is a powerful allure, which is precisely why one's partner is feeling so threatened.

Unfortunately, through the relentless and uncanny logic of self-deception, the belief that there's nothing wrong with maintaining this "friendship" will re-assert itself if not countered by a strong and consistent push to follow up on these clues. It is natural to seek the path of least resistance, to choose the course that is far less strenuous emotionally. The term "crazy-making" is helpful in this regard. So long as the partner's hurt reaction can be attributed to their personal deficits, to making much ado about nothing, then the pleasures of the "friendship" can continue without interference. The partner pays the price in hits to self-esteem and ultimately doubting their own perceptions.

Below are the key insights that are most likely to be avoided by those involved in a "friendship" like this, but once these ideas are reckoned with and discussed with one's partner, the path out of the negative cycle may become clear:

(1) The "friendship" you have been claiming as a right is making your partner suffer. Decide whether you want to preserve your marriage. If so, it is crucial to stop asserting that this outside relationship is harmless.

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(2) Tell your partner that their insecurity is not a personal defect but rather a natural response to feeling shut out of this "friendship" and feeling threatened by it.

(3) Acknowledge to your partner that emotional straying can be just as painful as sexual betrayal, because the barriers that now separate you as a couple are the same – secrets are being kept and certain things can't be talked about freely any more.

(4) If you are finding something in this "friendship" you are not finding with your partner, talk about it openly. Give your partner a chance to address these missing pieces so that your emotional depth and intimacy as a couple can be rejuvenated. Couples counseling may be necessary for you to express what has been lacking in the marriage and for you both to move into a phase of mutual and respectful growth.

(5) Explain to your "friend" that you need some distance so as to give your marriage a chance to resume its primacy in your emotional life, e.g. that it endangers your marriage to continue building such a compelling closeness with someone else.

Many who have found themselves in an emotional affair have told me they didn't seek it out, but rather that "it just happened." In retrospect, they acknowledge that there were danger signs that they ignored along the way, especially as the contacts became sweeter and more furtive. Increasing secrecy is certainly a red flag. Another is looking forward to the specialness of contact with this other person more than the daily-ness of being with your partner. It turns out that feeling understood on the level of the soul is far more sexy than sex itself. Restoring such excitement to the marriage is the best recourse for those who want to go on enjoying the privilege of having a partner throughout life.



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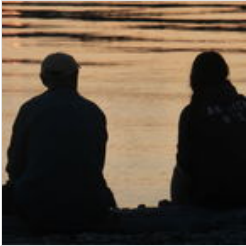


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