

The Infidelity Online Workbook:
An Effective Guide to Rebuild Your Relationship
After a Cyberaffair
Dr. Kimberly S. Young
Director
Center for Online Addiction

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<http://netaddiction.com>

DEFINING VIRTUAL ADULTERY

Is cybersex cheating? One must first ask, “How is adultery morally defined?” Bill Clinton would first need to know what we mean by the word “is”. Joking aside, the real issue here is how do we define infidelity. “Adultery is adultery, even if its virtual” according to *Famiglia Cristiana* (Christian Family), a magazine close to the Vatican. “It is just as sinful as the real thing.” The question of the morality of flirting, falling in love and perhaps betraying a spouse via the World Wide Web surfaced in the advice column of the June, 2000 issue of Italy’s largest-circulation newsweekly¹.

Adultery is often based upon moral judgments rather than factual information, independently formed through social conventions, religious teachings, family upbringing, reading books, and life experiences. So before anyone can answer the question, “is cybersex cheating”, we need to first define what is meant by the term adultery and what constitutes “sex” outside of marriage?

We all argue about where to draw the line. In my travels, I have found that there are levels of adultery with certain sexual acts being considered acceptable to do within a marriage while others are clearly not. For some people, flirting is acceptable but actual kissing and touching are wrong. Some people believe that anything up to the point of actual intercourse is wrong. While other more conservative folks believe that an impure thought about a member of the opposite sex is adulterous.

In a legal realm, this concept is more clearly defined for the purposes of the court such that sexual intercourse constitutes adultery. But in daily life, we are forced to form

our own opinions about infidelity and make our own choices on how to define for ourselves. So then how do we easily answer the question, “Is cybersex adultery?” What about looking at the time period before the Internet? How do we answer the following: Is phone sex adultery? Is renting an X-rated video in a hotel room while you are traveling on business without your wife adultery? Is flirting with the man in your office adultery?

Years ago, at a speaking engagement, an audience member raised her hand to ask me if I thought cybersex was cheating. Initially, I said, “it depends” (a stock answer among psychologists). Then I paused and stared at the woman for a moment. Up to that point, no one had ever asked me that question before. My answer came from the heart, rather than from a textbook or professional theory.

“Yes”, I finally replied. Cybersex is cheating dependent upon how it used. As I have already discussed, cybersex can be used as foreplay among couples to positively enhance their lovemaking. However, virtual sexuality is a double-edged sword as it can also detract from a couple’s sex life. What happens when cybersex is done alone and in secret?

Cybersex becomes adultery when one person in the relationship does it without consent from a partner and without concern for how he or she will feel about it.

Concealing a relationship outside of the primary one means that lying and hiding are involved, and at the moment, there is very little, if any, disregard for how the other person will feel about that outside relationship. The lying and secrecy associated with cybersex and most cyberaffairs will destroy a couple’s trust and commitment². Trust is scared in any relationship, and once that trust is broken, it is hard to repair.

For example, I received a phone call one day from a woman who had recently lost

her husband to cancer. She was 68 years old and had been married for nearly 43 years. They had two grown children, several grand children, and she described her husband as her best friend. He died six months ago and she was still grieving the pain of his loss. One day, while cleaning out his computer, she discovered reams of emails from other women. Women who wrote to her husband about told him in graphic detail how they would have sex with him when they met. It was worse than any adult romance novel she had read. To add insult to injury, she also found emails from him to these women, outlining how much he desired and wanted them. She cried as she read through each email and wondered how he could have done this to her. The man who was her best friend had a secret online fantasy life. Now, she felt like she never really knew him at all. The truth had changed her grief into anger, and she felt so alone and confused, because he wasn't even alive to ask what this all meant. All she could do was wonder to herself and cope with her betrayal without him.

We can see that cybersex is not simple harmless flirtation because it doesn't involve any "physical touching". The emotional pain and devastation to a once, loving relationship is just the same. Cybersex is cheating and can't be rationalized away. Not that I feel a moral obligation to decide that cybersex is cheating, but the reality is that cybersex makes a partner feels betrayed, hurt, jealous, and angry at the discovery. I always ask the audience, when this question comes up, "how would you feel if it was your significant other having cybersex?"

In this workbook, we'll explore the impact of virtual infidelity on couples and how "words on a screen" can lead to betrayal, separation, and divorce and discuss ways couples can avoid these potential problems. What if your relationship has already been struck by a

cyberaffair? How do you cope? I outline successful relationship building skills that will help you both to rebuild the broken trust in your relationship that will heal the pain and renew commitment.

THE VICTIMS OF TERMINAL LOVE

People just like yourself who are experiencing the anger, frustration, confusion, and pain of the women and men whose spouses' on-line habits had threatened or destroyed long and apparently stable relationships. Something new and frightening had crept silently into their lives, and they didn't know what to make of it or do about it. Through simple words on a computer screen, another man or woman had invaded their homes and their lives. Within weeks of breezy Internet chatting, *terminal love* had struck with the force of a tornado, leaving *cyberwidows* trying to dig out from under the real-life rubble.

This exclusive informational workbook has helped thousands of couples rebuild their relationships after *cyberaffair*. First, the booklet will outline the common warning signs of a cyberaffair so you can better understand what's happening to your relationship and be prepared to take action to head off serious damage. But what if terminal love already has begun to take hold, and while you're feeling its serious effects your spouse insists that nothing's wrong or simply wants to leave the marriage without talking about it? This booklet will also cover the steps to follow in confronting your avoidant spouse, taking care of yourself and your needs, and finding the right marriage counselor if necessary. Finally, this booklet shows you how to cope if you are dealing with a Cybersexual Addiction.

BEING ALONE IN YOUR STRUGGLE

The most common experience is that people feel alone in their situation. We live in a society that heavily promotes Internet use leaving couples feeling confused as many do not take the problem of cyberaffairs as seriously as they would a real-life affair.

Here are several messages from cyberwidows to help you understand that you are not alone in your fight to save your marriage. As a person living with an Internet user who has turned to the computer for intimacy, you may see or hear yourself in their stories. Or, if you're the one who has strayed from your marriage with late-night hideaways in Romance Connection or a string of cybersex one-nighters, you may hear in another voice the pain you're causing in your marriage.

"My name is Leonard. I have been married for seven years, and my wife and I have two children. She started using the chat rooms a few months ago to deal with her loneliness when I'm away at work. Soon the friendly chat turned to cybersex, and from there it escalated into phone sex. Finally, she started driving to meet a couple of her cyberlovers hundreds of miles away, taking the children with her! When I found out about this and confronted her, she refused to admit she had a problem. I filed for divorce, and I'm afraid she's going to take the kids and move far away with one of these guys. Any information or similar stories you could provide me would be of great help."

"My name is Ellen and I live in Pittsburgh. Today, my husband of fifteen years told me he's leaving to go live with a woman in Australia whom he met on the Internet three months ago. I am shocked! They have never met in person - my husband has never even been out of the country. Now she's finding him a job in Australia, he's got his plane ticket, and he's going tomorrow. How could this have happened? What do I do?"

"Reading your Web site about Internet Addiction this morning was the answer to my prayers. My husband's been addicted to these chat centers for a couple of years. He's a very outgoing person, and I didn't mind when he just talked to other women. But when the conversations turned to sexual interactions, he had crossed the line. He lost his job when he got caught swapping e-mail love notes with them at work. He went to therapy but quit after four sessions. He says he loves me and he's trying to cut down, but it keeps going on. I am

angry, bitter, and suspicious. We've been married twenty-two years, and though I love him and want to help him through this, I am on the verge of leaving. I thought I had the skills to handle this, but the reoccurrence comes much too often for me to bravely fight on."

"My wife spends more than fifty hours a week chatting with some guy she met on-line and our marriage and family life is in a shambles. She receives erotic email and every time I try to tell her how it hurts our marriage, she claims that it is all my fault. I think she even talks to him on the phone and I fear that she may run off with him. My pastor does not know how to help. What can you suggest to bring her back to reality? Our whole family is really hurting!"

The Seven Warning Signs of a Cyberaffair:

The first issue is to determine if you are dealing with a cyberaffair in your relationship. Due to the extent that people try to conceal a cyberaffair, you may be easily misled to believe that your spouse is simply using the Internet for work. If you suspect that your spouse or partner has found love on the Internet, ask yourself whether you've seen the following signs in their behavior:

- 1. Change in sleep patterns** - Chat rooms and meeting places for cybersex don't heat up until late at night, so on-lineaholics tend to stay up later and later to be part of the action. If your partner suddenly begins coming to bed in the early-morning hours, long after you've turned in, there's a good chance that cyberlove is brewing. Similarly, if he or she sometimes leaps out of bed an hour or two earlier and bolts to the computer, a pre-work e-mail exchange with a new romantic partner may explain things. Or if the cyberlover lives several time zones away, this may be the only time for live computer interaction.
- 2. A demand for privacy** - If someone begins cheating on their spouse, whether on-line or in real life, they'll often go to great lengths to hide the truth from their wife or husband.

With terminal love, this attempt usually leads to the search for greater privacy and secrecy surrounding their computer usage. Maybe he's moved the computer from the visible den to a secluded corner of his locked study. Perhaps she's changed her password in fear that her husband knew the old one. Or, where he used to share some of what he was doing on-line and whom he met there, he now cloaks all his activities in secrecy. And when they're on-line, cheating cyberlovers do not want to be disturbed or interrupted - that might lead to getting caught.

- 3. Household chores ignored** - When any Internet user increases his time on-line, household chores often go undone. That's not automatically a sign of terminal love, but in a marriage those dirty dishes, piles of laundry, and unmowed lawns might indicate that someone else is competing for the suspected person's attention. In an intimate relationship, sharing chores often is regarded as an integral part of a basic commitment. So when a spouse begins to invest more time and energy on-line and fails to keep up his or her end of the household bargain, it could signal a lesser commitment to the relationship itself - because another relationship has come between you.
- 4. Evidence of lying** - Did the credit-card bills for on-line services suggest your wife was spending three times longer on the Net than she claimed? Did your husband swear he was using the Internet only for research for a work project when you know he finished it a week ago? When you walked in the room as your partner was logging off, did she insist she was "just chatting" on-line, when the flushed look on her face and disheveled clothes indicate a different activity? Most Internet addicts lie to protect their on-line habit, but

those engaging in terminal love have a higher stake in concealing the truth, which often triggers bigger and bolder lies - including telling you they will quit.

5. Personality changes - Cyberwidows often tell me how surprised and confused they were to see how much their partner's moods and behaviors changed since the Internet engulfed them. A once warm and sensitive wife becomes cold and withdrawn. A formerly jovial husband turns quiet and serious. If questioned about these changes in connection with their Internet habit, the spouse engaging in terminal love responds with heated denials, blaming, and rationalization. The cyberwidow is told she's the one with the problem, or it's just no big deal. For a partner once willing to communicate about contentious matters, this could be a smokescreen for a cyberaffair.

6. Loss of interest in sex - Some cyberaffairs evolve into phone sex or an actual rendezvous, but cybersex alone often includes mutual masturbation from the confines of each person's computer room. So when your Internet-obsessed spouse suddenly shows a lesser interest in sex with you, it may be an indicator that he or she has found another sexual outlet. If sexual relations continue in your relationship at all, your partner may be less enthusiastic, energetic, and responsive to you and your lovemaking. She could be expending her real passions on a cyberpartner, or her guilt from carrying on a cyberaffair may leave her not wanting to be touched by you.

7. Declining investment in your relationship - Those engaging in terminal love no longer want to do fun things or go out together with you - even when their busy Internet schedule

allows. They shun those familiar rituals like a shared bath, talking over the dishes after dinner, or renting a video on Saturday night. They don't get as excited about taking vacations together and they avoid talk about long-range plans in the family or relationship. They're having their fun with someone else, and their thoughts of the future revolve around fantasies of running off with their cyberpartner - not building intimacy with you.

Unlike spouses who catch their husbands or wives in open adultery, you may only suspect that your loved one is sharing intimate words with another woman or man on a computer. By evaluating your situation using these warning signs as a guide, you can make more informed choices and act to intervene more swiftly and successfully.

Five Common Reactions to a Cyberaffair:

If you already know that your loved one is having a cyberaffair, then you probably have already experienced the confusion and anger that typically follows such a discovery. It is very painful to believe that your loved one prefers to spend more time on the computer with a virtual stranger than with you. The hurt is more difficult when you learn of telephone calls or secret visits your partner has made to the “other woman” or “other man.” Below are the five common reactions that a Cyberwidow often experiences when dealing with their Internet-cheating partner.

- 1. Cyberwidows begin to assume the neglected household duties typically performed by their loved-ones.** Have you started cutting the lawn, doing the dishes, or the

grocery shopping? If you have children, have you begun to take on more of the parenting roles that your spouse used to do? Are you the one now driving your children to school, band practice, or sporting events? It is common for cyberwidows to assume the responsible for such chores once they realize that if they don't do it the work won't be done. It is sometimes difficult for cyberwidows to assert their own needs, so they seek respect and validation through such a caretaking role, with the belief that soon "things will be back to normal." Cyberwidows initially believe that this is a "phase" and if they keep the status quo by performing such tasks that eventually the person will become bored with the computer.

- 2. Cyberwidows try to control the situation and the person.** Out of frustration and jealousy, you may attempt to take charge of the situation and think to yourself "If he won't stop then I will him stop." It is common for cyberwidows to initially control the person's behavior by changing the password to prevent access to the Internet account, cancel the on-line service, or even dismantle the computer. This is normal and you shouldn't blame yourself for taking such desperate measures. It is very painful to deal with the reality that your partner prefers the company of someone they met over the Internet instead of the real-life relationship you both have shared. By acting this way, it is important that you understand that your actions represent the underlying love you feel toward your partner and this is an attempt to regain his or her attention in your relationship. And often, your attempts to control the situation don't resolve the problem or stop your partner's love affair with the net.

- 3. Cyberwidows often become frustrated and jealous of the computer.** Have you felt crazy for being jealous of a *computer*? Have you suppressed your own anger or ignored your personal needs for the sake of your partner - who doesn't seem to care how you feel? It is normal to feel angry, jealous, or frustrated with your partner. You wouldn't be human if you didn't feel this way. After all, he or she has violated the commitment you both made to have a monogamous and caring relationship. A virtual stranger has suddenly entered your lives – and this can be a very painful reality to accept.
- 4. Cyberwidows attempt to conceal the problem.** Have you ever made up excuses for why your husband can't come to the phone when his mother calls or lied about why your wife and you had to cancel dinner with friends. Not only does the cybewidow privately cope with a cyber-cheating partner, but may go about trying to hide the behavior from others. Despite feeling upset and agitated by the person's behavior, cyberwidows conceal the extent of problems in the relationship. And their actions even enable their partners to continue on this destructive path by paying the on-line bills, setting up another telephone line to accommodate the modem, or lie to family and friends who call for the person.
- 5. Cyberwidows feel afraid and don't want to see the relationship end.** Have you feared that your partner will run off with his or her cyberlover? Have you tried to talk with your partner who no longer seems to care how you feel? It is common for cyberwidows to want the relationship to continue, but the cheating-partner doesn't

seem interested. In many cases, the cheating-partner may even begin to blame you for all of the problems in the relationship. Problems that you weren't even aware existed before now. For example, John's wife left him after 20 years of marriage for someone she met over the Internet just three months ago. John said, "We had gone through so much in our marriage, and I thought we would last forever. I just can't believe it ended like this." Like John, it is easy to understand the devastation felt after years of commitment. And the disbelief associated with your partner's eagerness to end your relationship for someone they hardly know.

Four Steps to Avoid Being an Enabler:

These reactions may be normal but they do not help you or your partner. These actions actually help the person continue this distancing behavior instead of taking responsibility for their role in the relationship. That is, these reactions are very much like an enabler who tries to compensate for the actions of an addict. Ultimately, you can only change your own behavior and not the behavior of anyone else. Here are four simple steps

Cyberwidows may become codependent.

Codependent behavior is most closely associated with those whose self-esteem comes from their success as people-pleasers. Their main goal in life is to give their partners what they want at the expense of their own needs. To assure success at pleasing, the co-dependent may become extremely sensitive to the momentary mood of his or her partner and may constantly worry about what the partner thinks and tries extremely hard not to make a mistake. Because of these self-defeating characteristics, the co-dependent

usually is much more in tune with what someone else wants than with her own wants and needs. There is a core belief that no one could love her for herself or just as he is.

Therefore, love and devotion must be earned.

A codependent female partner may engage in a variety of behaviors that range from the smallest violation of her value system to the truly dangerous and destructive. The energy expended on such an endeavor can take a heavy emotional toll as she tries repeatedly and unsuccessfully to "keep her man happy." She may change her hair color, lose/gain weight, quit her job/go to work, or wear sexy underwear. Or she may perform sex acts that are unpleasant or repulsive to her, or attend events that shock and confuse her, swing with others, or expose herself to sexually transmitted diseases. Or, most importantly if children are involved, she may use them and/or ignore them in her efforts to focus on her addicted partner. A codependent female partner rationalizes the addict's behavior and puts undo pressure on herself for not trying hard enough:

- I was afraid I wasn't woman enough for him.
- At least he isn't out drinking.
- At least he isn't beating me.
- Virtual sex is better than having real life sex.
- I was afraid I could never please him sexually.
- I was afraid there was something wrong with me.
- I was afraid I was just being a prude.
- I felt stupid being jealous of a computer
- Men will be men.

A codependent male partner may start to pay more attention to his wife or girlfriend, take her out to dinner, call more often, give gifts, or send flowers. For him, these are genuine signs of affection. He truly loves his partner, but fears that he is slowly losing her to an online lover so he will put up with her cyberflings to save the marriage. In turn, he gives up his own needs and focuses on ways to win her back.

Jason knew that his wife was having cybersex with different men and he wrote to me about his situation, “My wife is severely addicted to the cybersex and cyberaffairs and is divorcing me after 12 years because she is in love with a man 2000 miles away. They chat, video, and telephone each other as much as twelve hours a day, plus she hits the chat rooms. She has totally cut me out of her life. She neglects the house and the only way dishes or laundry get done is if I do them and have done it all for over four months now. We have three children, ages seven, five, and two. I now take care of all their needs and pick up them up after school. She stays up all night until four, five, or even six in the morning and then can't get up to get the kids ready for school. She then sleeps during the morning while our two-year old is left unattended. All she does is scream at me, but talks all lovingly to her cyber friends. I love her, she is my everything. I've done everything to keep her – tried to be attentive and show her how much I care, but now all she wants is a divorce.”

For many couples, cybersex disrupts a once happy marriage making it difficult to contemplate separation and divorce. Inside you know that this person is different since the Internet came into the home. The sudden changes in a relationship make it easy to initially fall into codependent patterns where you feel that if you just tried to harder, everything will

be okay.

How can you tell if you have become an enabler? Here are some warning signs to determine if you have fallen into codependent patterns. Review this checklist and see how many items you endorse. The more you check, the more likely you have become an enabler for cybersex abuse. Do you:

- Protect your partner from the consequences of his or her behavior
- Deny the obvious
- Make excuses and justifications to others
- Feel responsible for your partner's behavior
- Obsess over your partner's behavior
- Believe that if your partner would only change, all your problems will disappear
- Feel self-doubt and fear
- Feel alone
- Neglect spiritual pursuits including prayer or meditation
- Experience changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Become anxious and stressed over your partner's behavior
- Notice your work performance has decreased
- Takeover your partner's responsibilities in an effort to keep family life "normal"
- Become over-involved in work or outside activities

It's easy to fall into codependent patterns, especially when you love someone and know that things weren't always this bad. This is particular true among couples who

previously enjoyed a happy and healthy relationship. To avoid being an “enabler” in your relationship, you must learn how to increase meeting your own needs.

1. **Choose one situation in which you know this behavior is harmful.** For example, have you lied to family members about why your Internet-obsessed husband hasn't been able to visit lately? Or have you given in to your partner's request for privacy when at the computer? In the space below, write down the behaviors that have been most harmful to your relationship:

2. **Study the situation and then determine the best solution in the long run.** Realize that lying for your husband will only hurt *your* relationship with those relatives and friends in the long run. Decide that your husband must take responsibility for his own actions for you both to remain in a healthy relationship. OR perhaps realize that your partner's privacy demands will make you feel frustrated, angry, and hurt in the long run and if your relationship is to survive then you need to spend more quality time together. In the space below, write down how changes in your behavior will be beneficial in the long run:

3. Design a strategy to alter your behavior so that you can reach the long-range goal.

Instead of lying for your husband, you should make him take responsibility for his actions and ask that he call his family when he is unable to go out because he would rather stay on the computer. Instead of giving in to your partner's requests for privacy, you should explain that you feel hurt and frustrated by her behavior. Take action to go the movies, out to dinner, or to see a play together. In the space below, list ideas for how you might begin to alter your behavior to achieve your long-term goal:

4. **Monitor your reactions day-by-day so you begin to do only those things that will achieve your long-range goal.** Remember that change doesn't happen overnight.

What matters most is that you keep trying.

How to Communicate with your Partner:

Since the Internet came into your lives, you may find it difficult to talk with one another. Or you may have always had trouble expressing your needs especially when your partner doesn't seem to want to listen. The following are seven steps to help you communicate with your partner.

1. **Set your specific goals** - What do you really want? Do you just need your partner to end the cyberaffair while you still allow an occasional cybsersex dalliance, or do you want all communication with the opposite sex terminated as a solid gesture to begin rebuilding your trust? Are you hankering to pull the plug completely on all Internet use, and if so, are you prepared for the likely withdrawal to hit? If you adopt a more modest goal of time moderation, how many hours per week would you aim for - twenty-five or five? Do you want him or her to limit Internet usage to weeknights, with weekends free to spend together, or are you willing to grant one on-line weekend day with the assurance that you will have one shared weekend day to go out and have fun or just spend quiet time at home? Think about what you're really looking for in the relationship, beyond the changes you will request regarding Internet usage and activity. If you've struggled to ask for your needs to be met previously, this Internet-triggered crisis could provide an opening for you

to become more clear and assertive about the kind of intimacy you seek. Use the opportunity to do some real soul-searching before you approach your spouse.

2. Find a good time to talk - The worst time to approach your partner is when she or he is at the computer. Interrupting during the height of a cybersex encounter would be especially embarrassing to your spouse, and you'd both likely begin your communication with anger and hostility - not the best conditions for a fruitful dialogue. Plan for a wide window of time to share openly and honestly, when the distractions of home and family life are minimized. Many cyberwidows complain that because she's *always* on-line, they can never find a moment to approach her. If you approach him just before he normally would go on-line, with a simple and direct overture like: "Before you log on, I need to talk to you for a few minutes." This timing is preferable to waiting until 2 am when the offending partner comes to bed - by then you're both tired and you've been seething with resentment for the last several hours. There may be no perfect time, but whenever you approach your spouse you want to be clear, calm, and rested.

3. Decide what you most want to say - Just as you need to be specific about the changes you're asking for, you need to be specific regarding just what behavior is upsetting to you, exactly how it impacts you, and when you've experienced the pain. This could mean describing how it hurts when you miss dinners together or anger at picking up the slack over the chores, feeling disappointment about an empty sex life, or sadness over the end of your family outings. Recall actual incidents where your spouse let you down - the movie on Saturday he wouldn't go to with you, the dinners she no longer prepares. Think

about how your spouse's behavior has affected you in your own moods and behavior. Are you losing sleep because you're upset with what's happening? Do you feel more irritable or angry? Are you worried about where your relationship is going? Again, this is an opportunity to share your deepest troubles and concerns in the marriage.

4. Use non-blaming "I" statements - Use nonjudgmental language that won't sound critical or blaming. If you say, "You never pay any attention to me because you're always on that damn computer," your spouse will perceive it as an attack and act defensively. Instead, use "I" statements that communicate your experience and your feelings. "I feel neglected when you spend long nights on the computer" or "I feel rejected when you say you don't want to make love with me." If you suspect terminal love but don't have hard evidence, avoid an attack posture that says "You're screwing around with women all night in those sex rooms and I've had enough of it!" Instead, speak to your real concerns: "I feel hurt that you don't want to talk about our future plans anymore, and I wonder if you've met someone else through the computer." Stay focused on the present experience. This isn't the occasion to bring up other time-consuming hobbies or obsessions your spouse used to indulge in - that only sounds judgmental. Stick with what's happening with the Internet, and avoid trigger words such as "always," "never," "should," or "must." They sound inflexible and invite heated rebuttal. Stick to simple statements of what you know or what you feel.

5. Listen empathetically - When your spouse does respond, stop and listen fully and respectfully. Try to suspend your point of view momentarily and walk in their shoes.

Taking this approach does not mean that you lose yourself or agree with their assertions or perspective. Rather, you are demonstrating that you're open to what he or she says and are trying to accept their reality without condemnation. Your receptivity may allow your spouse to open up about why they've stumbled into a web of terminal love, and you may be surprised by what you hear. Many spouses explain that they never sought cyberaffairs but found the process happening too fast for them to see and understand. Underneath, they may be feeling guilty and truly wish to stop. Or, the cyberflings may have stirred up their own resentments about the pain over what's been missing for *them* in your marriage. Without suspending your feelings of betrayal or loss of trust, without dropping your need to see your spouse make real changes, try to listen to these explanations as openly as possible. Remember also that your facial expression and body language also communicate your receptivity or lack of it. Unlike Internet encounters, your communication is multi-dimensional!

- 6. Be prepared for a negative response** - Ideally, your spouse will listen to your pain caused by their cyberaffair, accept your perspective, engage in a productive discussion, and agree to concrete changes. It's also quite possible that no matter how specific and non-blaming you have come across, your spouse will keep attacking, defending, mocking, and counter-blaming you, and running back to their computer corner. This is the most challenging and pivotal moment you're likely to face. If you recoil and don't speak up again, your spouse's behavior won't change and you'll feel even worse. Stay true to your needs and stick with your goals. Don't engage your spouse in a lengthy argument. If it's clear that he or she is not willing to communicate openly this time, suspend your efforts

and walk away. But try again the next day or the next week, using the same strategies we've outlined. And add your feelings about how you're now increasingly hurt, worried, or frustrated by your spouse' refusal to listen.

- 7. Consider other alternatives** - If your attempts at communicating in person fail, don't despair. Try writing your spouse a letter. Silly as it may sound to write a letter to the person you live with, you may find benefits to a longer forum that allows you to communicate all your thoughts and feelings without interruption from your spouse. Reading your letter in a less charged atmosphere may allow your spouse to drop their defensive posture and respond to you in a more balanced manner. You might even consider communicating by e-mail, which not only offers the same freedom of interruptions as letters but can demonstrate to your spouse that you don't view the Internet itself as entirely evil. You both might even share a laugh at the irony of taking this approach, which could open the door to a more productive face-to-face talk. You also might consider requesting couples counseling, preferably with a therapist who understands the Internet and its particular allure. In counseling, you may get to the heart of your message more quickly and easily and work your way to the roots of your marital discord. Perhaps your spouse found your sex life uninspiring and turned to cybersex for passion and adventure. Once your feelings have been heard and steps taken to address them, you might engage in ways to open to your more passionate side. As a final alternative, especially if your spouse refuses to join you in couples counseling, seek out the support of a counselor by yourself. A trained professional can help supply the validation you didn't get from your spouse, and assist you in weighing your options.

(Read more on this topic in the **How to Seek Marriage Counseling** section). If you tune in to what you need and act accordingly, you no longer are a victim - even if you choose to end the relationship.

How to Identify Problems Underlying Your Relationship:

Cyberaffairs may be a symptom of an underlying problem that existed in the marriage before the Internet ever entered your lives. Here is a list of the top five stressors on marriages that lead to cyberaffairs (not in order of importance):

1. Poor Communication
2. Routine or poor sex life
3. Differences in child-rearing practices
4. Recent relocation from support from family and friends
5. Money Problems

These are common troubles for any couple. Yet, the presence of such issues will increase the risk of a cyberaffair. When two people are talking over the Internet, the conversation offers unconditional support and comfort. A cyberlover can type an empathetic message when he lives thousands of miles away for you, and in real-life be rude, aggressive, or insensitive to the people he meets. But yet this electronic bond can offer the fantasy of all the excitement, romance, and passion missing in a current relationship. Excitement and passion can easily be drained when a couple argues

frequently about money or the children. Instead of dealing with how to put the spice back in your relationship, people can use a cyberaffair as an easy escape from the real issues.

Lets take a look at how you can use a cyberaffair as an opportunity to put back what was missing in your relationship. That's right. Instead of viewing this experience as an end, it can be a happy beginning for a deeper sense of intimacy and sexuality.

Here is a technique that you both can share to begin the healing process. In the space provided, fill out the columns under situation, thoughts, feelings, and action. Do this separately and later we will compare your lists.

First, describe a situation in your marriage that has made you feel bad in the past. If you need more room to write, use the backside of this sheet. Next, write down the thoughts and feelings you experienced in that situation. Finally, write down the action you took in response to that situation. That is, did you bottle up how you really felt, yell at your wife, walk out in the middle of the argument, or even log on to the Internet to seek comfort?

| Situation | Thoughts | Feeling | Action |
|-----------|----------|---------|--------|
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Once you have completed the form sit down together to compare your answers.

Look at the types of situations that brought you pain in the past. What type of issues upset you the most? Do recurrent themes arise such as arguments about money, the children, sex, or the in-laws. Does the same issue arise for both of you? Or do you each have a unique issue that is most problematic in the relationship? This exercise helps you to identify recurrent issues present in your relationship.

Next, reflect on how you the feelings and thoughts you experienced during the situation. How did you feel when your husband brought up the subject of his mother? What did you think when your wife told you she let your daughter stay out past her normal curfew? Do you feel the passion is gone from your marriage? Do you feel that sex is routine and boring?

Once you have established the connection between your thoughts and feelings in relation to the situation identified, it is important to look at your behavior or your actions. How do you deal with thinking you are in an unhappy situation? How do you respond when you argue? How do you respond when you feel angry? How do you respond when you blame yourself?

Analyze the action you each took to deal with either the situation or how you coped with your thoughts and feelings. *For the person involved in the cyberaffair - evaluate the situations or past arguments where you relied upon the Internet to cope.* When were angry, hurt, or frustrated, did you talk about it with your cyberlover instead of your wife or husband? If you feel that sex has become dull with your wife, do you use cybersex to feel sexually satisfied? *For the other – evaluate the situations or past arguments where you left the situation unresolved:* Did you walk away in the middle of an argument? Do you

typically scream at your partner to emphasize your feelings? Do you keep your feelings bottled-up inside?

Review carefully the situation and the actions you each took to deal with it. In particular, look for instances the computer came between you both in reaction to your situation, thoughts and feelings. Instead of looking at the computer as the answer to your relationship problems, it is time to refocus your energies to rebuild the trust and commitment in your real-life relationship.

Rebuild Trust and Commitment in Your Relationship:

So far, the focus has been on the cyberwidow's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. It is time to investigate how the person engaged in a cyberaffair can respond to these issues. Lets take a closer look at the impact of a cyberaffair and three important ways you can help rebuild your real-life relationship.

1. **Stop Rationalizing the Behavior.** It is hard to imagine that typed-text over the computer screen can turn into romance. And for this reason, most cyberaffairs begin very innocently. That is, you didn't purposely go on the Internet to look for someone else. But once you began chatting and meeting new people on-line, the experience afforded an opportunity to form intimate bonds with fellow on-line users. And before you realize the damage done to your real-life relationship, you are having intense discussions, erotic chat, and passionate feelings for a new on-line friend. At first it is easy to rationalize such behavior, "Its just words on the screen," "I am just having fun," "I am not really touching anyone, so cybersex is okay," or "What my wife doesn't

know won't hurt her." But the emotional and physical connection that you have formed for this on-line relationship can have just as devastating as a real-life affair. You are emotionally unavailable. You lie about what you do on-line for so long. You hide the telephone bills so that your partner doesn't see all the long distance calls. You may snap at your wife for no reason. Or you lack the passion and desire that once existed in your marriage. These types of responses to your real-life partner cause significant harm to your future together. Just think how you would feel if your wife or husband started acting this way towards you? You would feel hurt, angry, and jealous. So how can you continue to rationalize that your behavior is not hurting anyone? You can't.

- 2. Repair the Broken Trust.** Have you made half-hearted denials of romantic electronic meetings? Or perhaps have you promised to end the cyberaffair only to return to the midnight Internet liaisons with your cyberlover. The lies and broken promises have damaged the underlying bond of trust in your relationship. How can this person ever trust you again if you have purposely lied about the nature of your on-line activities? How can you go forward in your marriage knowing that you are secretly having an erotic rendezvous on the Internet? In order to repair the trust, all ties to the cyberaffair(s) must end. And you must be honest and accurate with your spouse, explaining that you have "put an end to it" and meaning it. This is an important first step. Without it, there is no way to rebuild the relationship. You need to recognize that an on-line intruder has invaded the intimacy once shared in your marriage. And just because you end the affair – don't assume your partner will automatically believe you. It will take time before honesty

and trust is put back in your relationship. The healing process is long and you need to be patient.

3. **Renew Your Commitment.** When you give an outsider to your marriage more attention and understanding than you do your wife or husband, you have weakened the nature of your commitment in the primary relationship. It is important to remember that when dealing with the woman in your life, she needs *respect, devotion, validation, reassurance, caring, and understanding*. When dealing with the man in your life, remember he needs *trust, acceptance, appreciation, admiration, approval, and encouragement*. And you can't provide these things when you are too busy talking to someone else over the Internet. Remember your actions directly impact how your wife, husband, or real-life significant other is feeling. When your partner attempts to explain the pain and frustration experienced because of your cyberaffair, listen with an open mind and warm heart. To renew your commitment, you must understand the hurt you caused and be ready to ask for forgiveness. By taking the time to fully understand your partner's feelings of abandonment and loneliness, you can begin to have a deeper sense of intimacy in your relationship.

4. **Spend Quality Time Together** – The quickest way to improve your relationship together is to spend quality time with one another. Go on a candlelight dinners or a long walk in the park together. Plan a romantic vacation together at someplace you both have always wanted to visit. Or start a new hobby together such as bike-riding, tennis, or golf.

How to get your partner into Marriage Counseling:

In many cases, the relationship will be strengthened with the provision of marital therapy to help cope with the immediate pain, broken trust, and impaired communication associated with most cyberaffairs. Yet, in most cases, the spouse engaged in the cyberaffair is defensive with the mere mention of marriage counseling, saying such things as:

- I am not the one with the problem.
- You are the one with the problem.
- I don't need to see a shrink.

These comments and such resistance are likely to make the faithful partner feel frustrated and alone. What can you do if your spouse is reluctant to seek out marriage counseling? How do you convince your Internet-obsessed partner that therapy will help? First, outline the benefits of counseling to strengthen your relationship. Emphasize that marriage counseling will help to:

1. Rebuild broken trust in your relationship,
2. Increase understanding and reduce blame for the cyberaffair,
3. Improve open communication about the problems that may have existed in the relationship before the cyberaffair, or
4. Increase intimacy and sexual excitement in your relationship.

Sometimes, if you begin with telling your partner that marriage counseling will improve your sex life – you may have an easier time convincing him or her to enter therapy.

The person who gave up the cyberaffair may initially feel agitated, angry, moody, or depressed. The person may even begin to show signs of an alcohol or drug dependence problem as they cut back hours on the net. Explain to your partner that these reactions are difficult to work through alone and some help would make the transition easier. Don't be afraid of finding resources in your area that may be able to provide assistance. And don't be afraid that others will laugh at you if you ask for help. There is nothing to be ashamed of as more people come to recognize the dramatic impact of cyberaffairs.

How to Seek Marriage Counseling:

When you begin to seek out marriage counseling, there are few things you must first realize. Therapists vary greatly depending upon the level of training, the type of education they have had, and the amount of knowledge that they have about the Internet and cyberaffairs. Specialized and trained professionals in this area are only slowly emerging. If you are trying to find a good therapist, here are five factors you should consider when choosing a therapist. Some important hints in finding the right therapist for you are:

- Find a therapist you feel comfortable with the therapist
- Find a therapist who fully comprehends the nature of your problem
- Find a therapist you feel you can share a collaborative relationship with
- Find a therapist who believes that someone can be addicted to the Internet

- Find a therapist who understands something about the Internet

In general, entering therapy is a difficult process. And it isn't easy to find a therapist familiar with the Internet, online addiction, and the impact of cyberaffairs. Over time, this will change, but in the meantime, make sure that your therapist is someone willing to listen and learn about the Internet in order to best help you. For more information, please contact the Center for Online Addiction at www.netaddiction.com.

Reading Suggestions:

BOOKS ON AFFAIRS

Tangled in the Web: Understanding Cybersex from Fantasy to Addiction
Authorhouse.com (available in paperback and as an e-book from www.authorhouse.com)
By Dr. Kimberly Young

Addictive Thinking: Understanding Self-Deception
Harper Collins
Abraham Twerski, MD

Online Seductions: Falling in Love With Strangers on the Internet
Kodansha International, 1998
By Esther Gwinnell

Caught in the Net: How to Recognize the Signs of Internet Addiction and Winning
Strategy for Recovery
John Wiley and Sons, 1998
By Dr. Kimberly Young

The Psychology of the Internet
Cambridge University Press, 1999
By Patricia M. Wallace

Hidden Dangers of the Internet: Using It Without Abusing It
Harold Shaw Pub, 1998
By Gregory L. Jantz, Ann McMurray (Contributor)

Hazelden Educational Materials:

Hazelden Educational Materials

1-800-328-9000

Codependent No More.

Hazelden, 1987

By Melody Beattie

Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction

Hazelden, 1992

By Patrick Carnes, Ph.D.

Each Day a New Beginning: Daily Meditations for Women

Touchstones: Daily Meditations for Men

Days of Healing, Days of Joy

By Larnie Larsen & Carol Larsen Hegarty

Recovery and Referrals:

Center for Online Addiction

www.netaddiction.com

Computer Addiction Services

McLean Hospital

www.computeraddiction.com

Cyberwidows Support Group

www.cyberwidows.com

Sierra Tucson

www.sierratucson.com

International Society of Mental Health Online

www.ismho.org

National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity

1090 S. Northcase Parkway, Suite 200 South

Marietta, GA 30067

(770) 989-9754

www.ncsac.org

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse.
<http://www.mhselfhelp.org>

Twelve Step Recovery Resources

Adults Anonymous Molested as Children
AAMAC World Services Organization
P.O. Box 662
Apple Valley, CA 92307

COSA (Partners)
9337-B Katy Freeway, Suite 142
Houston, TX 77024
(612) 537-6904

Co-Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (COSA)
P.O. Box 14537
Minneapolis, MN 55414
(612) 537-6904

Incest Survivors Anonymous (ISA)
P.O. Box 17245
Long Beach, CA 90807-7245
(562) 428-5599

Recovering Couples Anonymous (RCA)
P.O. Box 11872
St. Louis, MO 63105
(314) 830-2600

Sexual Recovery Anonymous (SRA)
P.O. Box 73
Planetarium Station
New York, NY 10024
(212) 340-4650

Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA)
P.O. Box 70949
Houston, TX 77270
(713) 869-4902

S-Anon (Partners)
P.O. Box 111242
Nashville, TN 37222

(615) 833-3152

Sexaholics Anonymous (SA)
P.O. Box 111910
Nashville, TN 37222-1910
(615) 331-6230

Sexual Compulsives Anonymous (SCA)

West Coast:

P.O. Box 4470
170 Sunset Blvd, #520
Los Angeles, CA 90027
(310) 859-5585

East Coast:

P.O. Box 1585
Old Chelsea Station
New York, NY 10011
(212) 439-1123

Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA)

The Augustine Fellowship
P.O. Box 650010
West Newton, MA 02165
(617) 332-1845

S-Anon Family Groups

P.O. Box 5117
Sherman Oaks, CA 91413
(818) 990-6910

¹ Pullella, P. (2000) Internet Adultery a Sin, Catholic Magazine Says. Reuters News Service, Source: Famiglia Christiana (Christian Family), June, 2000 Edition.

² Young, K, Cooper, A., Griffin-Shelley, E., Buchanan, J, & O'Mara, J. (2000) Cybersex and Infidelity Online: Implications for evaluation and treatment. *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*. 7(1), 59-74.