

Cybersex and Infidelity Online: Implications for Evaluation and Treatment

by

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Abstract

Prior research has examined how marital relationships can result in separation and divorce due to Internet addiction. This paper examines how the ability to form romantic and sexual relationships over the Internet that can result in marital separation and possible divorce. The ACE Model (Anonymity, Convenience, Escape) of Cybersexual Addiction provides a workable framework to help explain the underlying cyber-cultural issues increasing the risk of virtual adultery. Finally, the paper outlines specific interventions that focus on strategies for rebuilding trust after a cyberaffair, ways to improve marital communication, and finally how to educate couples on ways to continue commitment.

Introduction

Recent research has explored the existence and extent of pathological Internet use (Brenner, 1997; Griffiths, 1996 & 1997; Morahan-Martin, 1997; Scherer, 1997; Young, 1997a, 1997b, 1998a, 1998b, 1999) which has resulted in significant social, academic, and occupational impairment. In particular, aspects of this research (Griffiths, 1997; Young, 1998a, 1998b, 1999a) and prior research on computer addiction (Shotton, 1991) has observed that computer and/or Internet dependent users gradually spent less time with real people in their lives in exchange for solitary time in front of a computer. Young (1998a) found that serious relationship problems were reported by fifty-three percent of the 396 case studies of Internet addicts interviewed, with marriages and intimate dating relationships most disrupted due to cyberaffairs and online sexual compulsivity.

Cyberaffairs are generally defined as any romantic or sexual relationship initiated via online communication, predominantly electronic conversations that occur in virtual communities such as chat rooms, interactive games, or newsgroups (Young, 1999a). A Cyberaffair can either be a continuous relationship specific to one online user or a series of random erotic chat room encounters with multiple online users. Virtual adultery can look like Internet addiction as the increasing amounts of time utilizing the computer. Meanwhile, the person is addicted to the online lover only to display compulsive behavior towards the utilization of the Internet as a means to meet and chat with a new found love.

Infidelity online has accounted for a growing trend in divorce cases according to the President of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (Quittner, 1997). However, the nature and

scope of marital dissolution caused by such virtual infidelity has been greatly underestimated due to the Internet's current popularity as a technological advancement (Young, 1997a). Furthermore, healthcare professionals, especially marital and family therapists who are most likely to deal with such couples, are often unfamiliar with the dynamics associated with the relatively new concept of cyberaffairs and the electronic process of virtual-based "cheating". Therefore, this paper utilizes Young's ACE Model of Cybersexual Addiction (1999b) to understand the underlying motivation of infidelity online and outlines specific treatment strategies in working with such couples.

Potential Explanations of Infidelity Online

It is hard to imagine that a husband who would never walk into an adult bookstore could download online pornography or a wife who would never pick up the telephone to dial a 900-number could engage in erotic chat or phone sex with men she met online. It is equally difficult to understand how stable marriages of 15, 20, or 25 years end because of a three or four-month old cyberaffair. Yet, these are typical scenarios plaguing many couples today.

In order to understand the increased incidence of infidelity online, this paper applies the ACE Model of Cybersexual Addiction to explain how cyberspace creates a cultural climate of permissiveness that actually serves to encourage and validate sexually adulterous and promiscuous online behavior (Young, 1999b). The ACE Model examines three variables, *anonymity*, *convenience*, and *escape* that lead to virtual adultery.

First, the anonymity of electronic transactions allows users to secretly engage in erotic chats without the fear of being caught by a spouse. Anonymity provides the user with a greater sense of perceived control over the content, tone, and nature of the online experience. Online experiences often occur in the privacy of one's home, office, or bedroom, facilitating the perception of anonymity and that Internet use is personal and untraceable. Cyberaffairs are initiated via online communication (Young, 1999a) and typically begin in chat room settings allowing users to talk in real-time by typing messages to each other through "screen names" or "handles." Messages can either appear in the public forum for the entire room to read or an "instant message" can be sent privately to a single member of the room. The anonymity associated with electronic communication allows users to feel more open and frank in talking with other users. Anonymity also allows an online user to feel comfortable without needing to look for signs of insincerity or judgment in their facial expression, as would be true in real life. The privacy of cyberspace enables a person to share intimate feelings often reserved for a significant other that may open the door to a potential cyberaffair. Soon typed messages passing along the computer screen carry with them emotional significance that often precedes more erotic dialogue between online friends, which may blossom into virtual adultery.

Second, the convenience of interactive online applications such as ICQ, chat rooms, newsgroups, or role-playing games provides a convenient vehicle to meet others and their proliferation makes for easy access for a curious person's initial exploration. What starts off as a simple email exchange or an innocent chat room encounter can quickly escalate into an intense and passionate cyberaffair that leads to secret phone calls and sexy real-life meetings. Or a curious husband or

wife may secretly step into one of many rooms designed for marital infidelity with titles such as the *MarriedM4Affair*, *Cheating Wife*, or *Lonely Husband*, only to be shocked at the permissiveness of others engaged in virtual adultery. A husband who lives in New York considers it harmless to flirt with a woman who lives in Australia. A wife rationalizes that having cybersex isn't really cheating because of the lack of physical contact. Soon, a once loving husband suddenly becomes evasive and demands his privacy when online or a once warm and compassionate wife and mother turns towards the computer instead of caring for her children. In the end, a harmless cyber-romp spells trouble as a spouse may leave a once long term and stable marriage because of someone they just met over the Internet.

Many people falsely assume that the primary reinforcement to engage in adultery is the sexual gratification received from the online sexual act. Studies have shown the experience itself is reinforced through a type of drug "high" that provides an emotional or mental escape and serves to reinforce the behavior leading to compulsivity (Young, 1997, 1998a, 1998b). A lonely wife in an empty marriage can escape into a chat room where she is desired by her many cyber-partners. A sexually insecure husband can transform into a hot cyberlover that all the women in the chat room fight over. While sexual fulfillment may provide the initial reinforcement, the more potent reinforcement is the ability to cultivate a subjective fantasy world whereby the online can escape the stresses and strains of real life. The courts have already argued the role of online compulsivity as a mental disorder in the defense of online sexual deviancy cases. For example, one landmark case, the *United States versus McBroom*, successfully demonstrated that the client's downloading, viewing, and transferring of Internet pornography was less about erotic gratification and more about an emotional escape mechanism to relieve mental tension.

Implications for Marital Therapy

While the ACE Model of Cybersexual Addiction provides a workable framework to understand the cyberspace climate that serves to encourage and validate the cyberaffair, clinicians working in aftermath of such cases need guidance on appropriate ways to improve a couples communication and cohesion. Therefore, this section outlines specific interventions that focus on strategies for rebuilding trust after a cyberaffair, ways to improve marital communication, and finally how to educate couples on ways to continue commitment. To achieve this goal, this paper outlines how to: (a) detect a cyberaffair, (b) improve communication and confront the cheating spouse, (c) deal with underlying issues contributing to the cyberaffair, and (d) rebuild marital trust.

Detection of a Suspected Cyberaffair:

Unlike spouses who catch their husbands or wives in open adultery, a spouse may initially enter counseling with little more than a suspicion of a partner sharing intimate words with another woman or man on a computer. In such instances, the first step is to evaluate the situation using these early warning signs as a guide in order for therapists to make more informed choices and act to intervene more swiftly and successfully.

1. **Change in sleep patterns** - Change in sleep patterns - Chat rooms and meeting places for

cybersex don't heat up until late at night, so the cheating partner tends to stay up later and later to be part of the action. Often, the partner suddenly begins coming to bed in the early-morning hours, may leap out of bed an hour or two earlier and bolt to the computer for a pre-work e-mail exchange with a new romantic partner may explain things.

2. **A demand for privacy** - 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 a cyberaffair, this attempt usually leads to the search for greater privacy and secrecy surrounding their computer usage. The computer may be moved from the visible den to a secluded corner of his locked study, the spouse may change the password, or cloak all his or her online activities in secrecy. If disturbed or interrupted when online, the cheating spouse may react with anger or defensiveness. 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 a cyberaffair, this attempt usually leads to the search for greater privacy and secrecy surrounding their computer usage. The computer may be moved from the visible den to a secluded corner of his locked study, the spouse may change the password, or cloak all his or her online activities in secrecy. If disturbed or interrupted when online, the cheating spouse may react with anger or defensiveness.
3. **Household chores ignored** - Household chores ignored - When any Internet user increases his time on-line, household chores often go undone. That's not automatically a sign of a cyberaffair, but in a marriage those dirty dishes, piles of laundry, and un-mowed 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 marriage. When any Internet user increases his time on-line, household chores often go undone. That's not automatically a sign of a cyberaffair, but in a marriage those dirty dishes, piles of laundry, and un-mowed 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 marriage.
4. **Evidence of lying** - The cheating spouse may hide credit-card bills for on-line services, telephone bills to calls made to a cyberlover, and lie about the reason for such extensive net use. Most spouses lie to protect their on-line habit, but those engaging in a cyberaffair have a higher stake in concealing the truth, which often triggers bigger and bolder lies - including telling a spouse that they will quit.
5. **Personality changes** - A spouse is often surprised and confused 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 a cyberaffair responds with heated denials, blaming, and rationalization. Often times, the blame is shifted to the spouse. For a partner once willing

- to communicate about contentious matters, this could be a smokescreen for a cyberaffair.
6. **Loss of interest in sex** - 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. When a spouse suddenly shows a lesser interest in sex, it may be an indicator that he or she has found another sexual outlet. If sexual relations continue in the relationship at all, the cheating partner may be less enthusiastic, energetic, and responsive to you and your lovemaking.
 7. **Declining investment in your relationship** - Declining investment in your relationship - Those engaged in a cyberaffair no longer want to participate in the marital relationship - 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. Often, they are 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 a spouse. Those engaged in a cyberaffair no longer want to participate in the marital relationship - 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. Often, they are 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 a spouse.

Marital Communication:

The discovery of a cheating partner is difficult for the spouse to accept. Spouses react to the cheating partner with doubt, jealousy toward the computer, and a fear that the relationship will end because of someone they never met. Furthermore, spouses often become enablers as they rationalize their partners' behavior as just a "phase" and they go to great lengths to conceal the problem from family and friends. When working directly with the couple, practitioners should assist them in basic communication skills to improve open, effective, and honest communication without blame or anger. Some general guidelines include:

1. **Set specific goals** - Parameters should be established in terms of the communication goals within the counseling session. To facilitate goal setting for the non-offending spouse, a clinician should pose such questions as, "Do you just need your partner to end the cyberaffair while you still allow an occasional cybersex 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?" and "If you adopt a more modest goal of time moderation, how many hours per week would you aim for - twenty-five or five?" To facilitate goal setting for the cheating spouse, a clinician should pose such questions as, "Have you already, or will you, give up the cyberaffair?" "Are you in a position to give up the computer totally?" or "Have you considered sharing your computer experience together?" These goal-setting questions evaluate a couple's expectations

- related to the computer and assess their commitment to rebuild the present relationship.
2. **Use non-blaming "I" statements** – The therapist should emphasize the use of nonjudgmental language that won't sound critical or blaming. If the spouse states, "You never pay any attention to me because you're always on that damn computer," the receiver will perceive it as an attack and act defensively. As is common practice, the use of "I" statements allows for open communication of feelings in a nonjudgmental manner. Therefore, clinicians should help clients rephrase statements into non-blaming language. For example, the prior statement could be rephrased as, "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." Practitioners should help clients stay focused on the present experience and avoid the use of negative trigger words such as "always," "never," "should," or "must," that sound inflexible and invite heated rebuttal.
 3. **Empathetic Listening** – Help clients listen fully and respectfully. 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. If the offending partner tries to explain their motives for the affair, it is important to help the other partner suspend feelings of betrayal or loss of trust and listen to these explanations as openly as possible to maximize communication.
 4. **Consider other alternatives** – If face-to-face communication has been strained between the couple, clinicians should explore alternatives such as letter writing and even email exchanges. Letter writing provides a longer forum to allow thoughts and feelings to flow without interruption from a spouse. Reading a letter in a less charged atmosphere may allow the other person to drop their defensive posture and respond in a more balanced manner. E-mail exchanges not only offer the same freedom of interruptions as letters but also can demonstrate to the offending spouse that his or her partner doesn't view the Internet itself as entirely evil. The couple may share a laugh at the irony of taking this approach, which could open the door to a more productive face-to-face talk.

Underlying Issues:

Cyberaffairs and cybersexual encounters are typically a symptom of an underlying problem that existed in the marriage before the Internet ever entered the couple's lives. Pre-existing marital problems include: (a) Poor Communication, (b) Sexual Dissatisfaction, (c) Differences in child-rearing practices, (d) Recent relocation from support from family and friends, and (e) Financial 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, but in real-life be rude, aggressive, or insensitive to the people he meets. Yet this electronic bond can offer the fantasy of all the excitement, romance, and passion that may be missing in a current relationship. Instead of dealing with how to confront the issues hurting a marriage, people can use a cyberaffair as an easy escape from the real issues. The cyberaffair becomes a means of coping with unexpressed anger towards a partner as an outside person electronically offers understanding and comfort for hurt feelings. Therefore, it is vital that

therapists thoroughly assess and directly deal with possible underlying issues that contributed to the cyberaffair.

Rebuild Marital Trust:

As with any couple struggling in the aftermath of an affair, a major goal of marital therapy is helping the couple to rebuild trust in the relationship. However, special care must be taken to examine how to focus on relationship building after a cyberaffair because of several factors.

1. **Computer Use** - Cyberaffairs often happen inside the couple's home and the "cheating" partner's behavior is centralized around the computer, a tool that may also be used for non-romantic purposes such as for business or home finances. However, each time the offending partner approaches the computer for a legitimate reason, it may trigger feelings of suspicion and jealousy for the spouse. The therapist must help couple evaluate how the computer will be used at home so that they can establish reasonable ground rules such as supervised computer use or moving the computer into a public area of the family home.
2. **Psychoeducation** - The practitioner should also provide psychoeducational consultation for the couple to help remove the typical rationalizations exhibited by the offending partner and to help the spouse understand the motives leading up to the cyberaffair. The cheating partner may not have purposely gone on the Internet to look for someone else, but the online experience afforded an opportunity to form intimate bonds with fellow on-line users, which quickly escalated to erotic chat and passionate conversations. The cheating partner often rationalizes the behavior as just a fantasy, typed words on a screen, or that cybersex isn't cheating because of the lack of physical contact. Therapists should be careful not reinforce these rationalizations and focus on ways for the cheating partner to take responsibility for their actions. This is an important element in therapy if the couple is to rebuild honesty and trust in their relationship.
3. **Renew Commitment** - Finally, the therapist should help the couple evaluate how the cyberaffair has hurt the relationship and help formulate relationship-enhancing goals that will renew commitment and improve intimacy between the couple. To help the couple renew commitment, the therapist must stress forgiveness. Care should also be taken to evaluate the types of activities the couple used to enjoy before the Internet and encourage them to engage in those events once again. Finally, interventions, which focus on a couple's weekly progress and how couples can use the Internet together for sexual enhancement, should be explored.

Conclusion

This paper examines the powerful potential of romantic and sexual relationships on-line to negatively impact once stable marriages. The warning signs of a cyberaffair are outlined, with specific behavioral changes in relation to computer usage being most consistent indicators of online infidelity. Couples with pre-existing problems may be most at risk, especially as the ease of idolizing of these on-line relationships will negatively distort perceptions of marital intimacy and exacerbate pre-existing difficulties. To help repair marital commitment and trust, practitioners need to focus more carefully on the role of the computer and its implications for

treatment with such couples on the verge of *Cyber-divorce*.

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