

Cyberflirting: How Harmful Is It?

Many individuals have stated that cybersex and online flirting is always harmful to a real-time relationship. Whether or not this is true, there are clearly some unique factors that make cyberflirting different than real-time flirting. In normal human flirtation, there's typically an implicit, and sometimes explicit, boundary. The boundary states that this flirtatious behavior is pleasant but that it has a clear limit. It is often understood that we may engage in casual flirtatious language, share a glance, make a sexual joke, or tease each other in a provocative manner, but that this is as far as it will go.

Most of these cues are a complex combination of verbal and nonverbal communications, many of which, are not easily expressed on the Internet. Innuendo, exclamation, verbal punctuation, facial gestures, and intonation are all absent on the Net. Combine these factors with the ease of availability, anonymity, and the disinhibition that occurs on the Net, and you have fertile ground for an intensely flirtatious experience without the boundaries found in real-time interaction. All this occurs without of the normal social cues that promote reasonable boundaries. People can easily become carried away experiencing and expressing strong sexual emotion.

It's Easy to Get Carried Away

There have been numerous cases in which people started out on the Net only for the purposes of engaging in casual conversation that unintentionally ended up being highly sexual in nature. In addition, because of the accelerated intimacy that they experience, these people became more involved, more rapidly, than they ever intended. People often report that they experienced levels of intimacy and self-disclosure that were unparalleled in their real-life relationships! Needless to say, this can be highly problematic to your marriage or relationship.

Again, because of accelerated intimacy and disinhibition, people will share information with their Net mate that they wouldn't ordinarily share in their real-time relationship. This can represent a potential significant threat to any primary relationship or marriage. The relaxed conversation style, combined with the sexual themes that often appear in Internet communication, offer serious competition to sometimes mundane real life. After all, how can everyday life compete with the intense, uninhibited excitement of relationships online?

If you want to assess your dependence on an online relationship, or gauge its seriousness, consider discontinuing the online relationship. If that relationship has become a significant one, it will be a difficult break to make. You are experiencing

a similar scenario that people undergo when assessing an actual affair — that is, when people address the issues of the *marriage* versus the *affair*. To some extent, however, you will always be comparing a fantasy to real life, which is a tough comparison.

Cybersex

A major phenomenon that has occurred on the Internet is the occurrence of online affairs. I have treated and interviewed numerous individuals who've had online and real-time sex outside of their marriage or primary relationship that in *all* cases started as simple cyberflirting. Often they report tremendous excitement in their cybersexual encounters, which are then typically repeated.

A common question that people have is whether or not an online affair is cheating. The answer to this question is somewhat complex; however, I've distilled it down to a simple formula: *Any time you spend a significant amount of intimate time with another person outside your primary relationship, you may be breaching intimacy rules in your relationship.* It's a personal decision in each relationship whether spending time online and having cybersex are a breach of the relationship contract. Our research does demonstrate, though, that for those who use the Internet addictively, online cybersex frequently extends from cyberspace to the bedroom!

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