

# ISSUE 14

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## Is Cybersex “Cheating”?

**YES:** Stephen O. Watters, from *Real Solutions for Overcoming Internet Addictions* (Servant Publications, 2001)

**NO:** CBSNEWS.com, from “A Look at Internet Infidelity” (August 4, 2003)


### ISSUE SUMMARY

**YES:** Stephen O. Watters shares personal experiences of several women whose marriages have been unsatisfying and who have sought connection with men online. He argues that the type of connection people can establish via the Internet can be extremely powerful, and that the significance of these relationships can be just as damaging to a marriage as a live affair—perhaps even more so, since these online sexual relationships can, he says, lead to an addiction.

**NO:** CBSNEWS.com reports that while Internet relationships may not be healthy for a relationship, they are not the same thing as, and should not be equated with, an actual affair. A sexual relationship maintained only in print is nowhere near as intense as a relationship that is consummated in person.

**S**ince the dawn of the Internet, human beings have been using it as a source of information, improved communication, and in some cases, romantic or sexual partners. Web sites like match.com and planetout.com are among the many where people can, for a fee, peruse the ads of people whose photographs and descriptions sound intriguing to them. A visual version of newspaper and magazine personal ads, Internet dating has provided wonderful opportunities for many people to connect.

Some people, however, are not seeking a life partner or spouse, because they already have one at home. As some relationships mature, there may be any number of reasons one or both partners may have for seeking sexual pleasure outside of their primary relationship: feelings of love may be there, but feelings of attraction may have changed; one partner may have experienced some kind of disability that makes it no longer possible for her or him to perform sexually; the relationship may be flawed, but neither is willing to



discuss the problem; the couple may decide, together, that they want to enhance their sexual relationship by opening it up to other partners, and then comparing notes at home, and so on. Regardless of the reasons why people open up their relationships, when it is done by one partner without the partner knowing—without an implicit or explicit agreement that this is acceptable—it can create problems in, and even end, the relationship.

If you were to do a Google search on the word “cybersex,” over one million hits would be returned. Cybersex is the twenty-first-century’s version of phone sex. It involves two (or more) people using instant-messaging capabilities to write erotic messages to each other online, leading to arousal and orgasm in some way. While committed couples may use cybersex when one partner is traveling, or when the couple is in a long-distance relationship, cybersex is most often used as an exchange between strangers—where both people can create and seek out what they see as ideal persona online, and have intimate experiences with no strings attached.

For some, cybersex is a wonderful way of expressing fantasies and experiencing sexual pleasure without obligation—no relationship, and no chance of an infection or pregnancy. Others find cybersex to be threatening, particularly if it is done by their partner or spouse behind their backs. What do you think?

As you read this issue, consider what you think are characteristics of a romantic relationship that you value. What do you expect from your partner when it comes to sexual behaviors? How would you feel if you found out that she or he were having cybersex online with someone? Do you think it’s cheating, or as private as someone who chooses to masturbate in private?

In the following selections, Stephen O. Watters describes cybersex as a symptom of a much larger problem in a relationship. He argues that cybersex encounters that become regular appointments is “adultery,” and that they can only lead to heartbreak for all the people involved—including the person whose partner or spouse is involved in the online relationship. CBSNEWS.com presents an alternate view—that cybersex does not carry the same risks as an in-person affair does, both emotionally and physically.



## Affairs

### Question and Answer

#### Is Cybersex "Cheating"?

For a woman, the allure of a "knight in shining armor" online pushes her over the line and into adultery. She may arrange to meet several online lovers at hotels for sex. Yet when exactly did she cross the line? Does her relationship become adulterous when she has sex with another man, or does it begin as soon as she starts flirting?

"Women often justify their online relationships because they see them as virtual, not adulterous," says Marnie Ferree, "especially if the relationship is only emotional, not sexual yet."<sup>1</sup> Women cross the line, however, as soon as they begin to sneak around behind their husband's backs to share intimate thoughts with another man. Stay-at-home moms in chat rooms are sharing all this personal stuff they are hiding from their partners," says Peggy Vaughan, America Online expert on problems caused by infidelity. She adds that such experiences can "quickly escalate into their thinking they have found a soul mate. It's so predictable, it is like a script."<sup>2</sup>

"[Online relationships] can threaten marriages, even if there is no sex involved," says Dr. Shirley Glass, a Baltimore-based psychologist who has been studying infidelity for over twenty years. "Such online liaisons involve the three elements of an emotional affair: secrecy, intimacy, and sexual chemistry."<sup>3</sup>

Understandably, many participants in online communities never intended for their innocent conversations to lead to fullblown affairs. Take Beth and Bob, for example. Both wandered into Christian chat rooms not knowing that the emotional connections made there could lead to adultery. Or take Julie, whose online affair led to a divorce. "I really wasn't wanting affairs from these men online," she says. "I really just wanted someone that would talk to me . . . and I could talk about everyday things and I thought they cared."

Not only did Julie have an unintended affair, she failed to find someone who could meet her deeper needs. "These people don't care," she says now. "They are just using each other. It truly is a meat market, and I don't think there are a lot of real feelings involved. Oh, in some crazy way they think there is, but there's also the fear that if you aren't online then they will find someone else. I guess that is why the people that are into that stay online so

**Stephen O. Watters**

much. They are afraid of losing that partner—whoever they have been talking to. But it's inevitable, because no one can be on all the time, and sooner or later . . . they find someone that is more interesting or seems to say all the right things all over again."<sup>4</sup>

Debbie, a 36-year-old attorney from Los Angeles, wasn't looking for an affair; she just wanted someone to help her learn how to play a multiplayer game called *Darkness Falls*. One guy offered to help, but soon he started flirting with her. "I appreciated his help so much and wanted to continue getting it, so I innocently began flirting back," she said. "The flirtations grew, and soon enough we were having cybersex while we were in character. I grew less and less attracted to my husband, and the male character became my fantasy online husband in the game.

"I felt as though I had fallen in love with this character. My online husband and I began corresponding through email and expressed that love for each other and began talking on the phone. I started spending less time with my [real] husband and more time . . . online. Pretty soon I was missing court appearances because I couldn't get off the game. Luckily for me, my online husband [dumped me] after a year and a half. . . . My God, it was the worst feeling in the world. I felt like I had lost everything in the world that mattered to me. I left the game because I hurt so much."<sup>5</sup>

Both Debbie and Julie experienced a pattern that occurs frequently in relationships and has carried over to the Internet: the sex/intimacy exchange. "Women often give sex to get intimacy," says psychologist Dr. James Dobson, "and men give intimacy to get sex."<sup>6</sup> Internet chat rooms, newsgroups, and even online games have a way of bringing those tendencies together.

At first, a man may seem truly interested in discussing a favorite author with a woman in a literary newsgroup. As their conversation grows in intimacy, however, he may begin to pry about exotic interests. The woman who has invested in that relationship and has allowed it to meet a need for her may decide to respond in kind. "Having a meaningful relationship seems impossible for me," says the woman who is looking for a knight in shining armor. "I start to get attached emotionally and it scares men off; they just want free sex."<sup>7</sup>

A clandestine Internet relationship can seem fun for a season—swapping faceless messages can create the exhilaration of a masquerade ball. It's tempting to stay in an environment where your strengths can outweigh your weaknesses. Yet after that season is over what most people want is someone who will love them for who they really are. Especially when they're not at their best—when they're throwing up, when they have morning breath, or when they've just tripped up a flight of stairs. They desire the kind of intimacy where they are known for who they are—warts and all—and are still loved.<sup>8</sup>

Regrettably, that realization may not come until after they have developed a cybersex addiction or damaged their marriage with an online affair. What is your situation? Do you anxiously look forward to your next opportunity to connect with someone online? Do you prefer your online persona to who you are in real life? Have you developed an emotional relationship with someone online behind your spouse's back?



If you have had an adulterous online affair or show signs of cybersex addiction, you really need the help of a professional counselor. Few people are able to work their way back toward healthy sexuality and intimacy without the help of a professional who can guide them through unresolved emotional conflicts.

## Notes

1. Telephone interview with Marnie Ferree, August 2000.
2. Karen S. Peterson, "Spouses Browse Infidelity Online," USA Today, July 6, 1999. . . .
3. Ibid.
4. Email posting on Cyber Windows newsgroup. Used by permission.
5. Jennifer P. Schneider, "A Qualitative Study of Cybersex Participants: Gender Differences, Recovery Issues, and Implications for Therapists." . . . Also published in *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity* 7 (2000): 249-78.
6. James C. Dobson, *Love for a Lifetime* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1996), 88.
7. Schneider, "A Qualitative Study . . ."
8. Steve Watters, "Strange Love," July 22, 1999. . . .



## A Look at Internet Infidelity

**T**he Internet has made it easy to view pornography and even have Internet affairs or "cyber-sex." In fact, 8 to 10 percent of Internet users actually become addicted to cyber-sex and one-third of divorce litigation is actually sparked by online affairs.

The big questions are: Is cyber-sex considered cheating? Is it actually adultery and what should you do if you suspect that your spouse is having an online affair? How close is a cyber-affair to a real affair? How easy is it to cross that line?

To help sort this all out, Dr. Joy Browne, radio talk-show host, author and clinical psychologist and relationship expert, and a woman named Christine who used spy software and caught her husband contacting women over the Internet, offer their views on the matter on *The Early Show*.

Christine suspected that her husband was having online affairs. She says what tipped her off was, "Long hours on the computer in his office. And when I'd walk in, he'd be switching so I couldn't see what he was doing. He'd say he was working. And then I had gotten a picture sent to me from my sister and I'm not very computer literate, and I was checking the computer to find out where I put the picture when I downloaded it. I started finding pictures that he had—some very interesting photos."

So Christine installed a software package called eBlaster by Spectorsoft on the computer that she and her husband shared.

The program kept track of all activity on the computer including all e-mails, instant messages, Web sites visited and even every keystroke made from that computer. Reports were e-mailed to her, and that's how she caught him.

She says, "And that's when I found out all the different sites he was going to, what he was looking for. He put out an ad with his picture. He was looking for women in our area. I think his words were, 'loose women in our area'; and also foursomes. And then that kind of triggered me. I started paying a little more attention and made copies of everything that was going on and then I set him up and I pretended I was somebody with a different name and so I was able to have a conversation with him for quite a while that I found out exactly what he was doing, what he was saying."

She's now in the middle of a divorce.

It is important to note, it is legal to put this spy software on a computer as long as you own the computer—which Christine did. But she would not



have been legally allowed to put it on her husband's computer at work or any other computer that she did not own.

With the surge in cyber-affairs, a new market for electronic spying has developed. Web sites . . . describe an array of surveillance products capable of tracking a cheating spouse's e-mails and online chats, including some that can monitor each keystroke in real time.

But radio talk-show host Dr. Joy Browne says cyber-sex is really not cheating.

She says, "I'm one of those people who says no body fluids exchanged is not an affair. This is certainly tacky behavior." About Christine's situation, she notes before using the special software, Christine was already suspicious.

To Christine, Dr. Browne says, "You were having problems in your marriage, you probably weren't having sex. Whether you know the details about what he was doing, you have enough evidence. I feel like the software and computers is like looking in your kid's diary. You can find out by doing that, you can find out by object serving and you've got a much stronger case to say, 'look, I notice you're spending a lot of time at work.' I guess having the evidence may be helpful."

Christine says though she was aware of the problems in her marriage, she needed the extra proof. She says, "I still needed more. I was curious of what was going on because he would deny a lot of things and say it was nothing. Then he finally said, 'well, I'm just looking.' And this is a man who has always been very religious, very reputable."

When asked if there is any way cyber-affairs can be harmless, Dr. Browne says, "It's the same argument that people who use pot go on to use hard drugs. It seems to be circular reasoning. What we know is that men tend to talk to women when they're talking about emotional issues. If our men knew what we talked about with each other, they would go ballistic. But it's so expected and it's so understood.

"Do I think sort of talking in chat rooms when you're married is OK? I really don't. I think it's getting close to the edge. But it's not the same as an affair. If we make it the same as an affair then men will say, why not talk to them, why not date them, why not have sex with them? You're put at a different risk with sex involved doing anything other than typing. Typing is typing—sticky keyboard, but still typing," Dr. Browne says.



# POSTSCRIPT

## Is Cybersex "Cheating"?



**W**e receive very clear messages from the time we are children about what a relationship is supposed to be—who should be involved, when and under what circumstances sexual behaviors are okay, and which behaviors are acceptable. As we get older, we analyze these messages and decide which are consistent and which are inconsistent with our own values and beliefs.

Relationships come in all different incarnations. When people get married, there is an expectation that they will stay together "til death do we part." If a person is married at age 22, they may be talking about more than 60 years with the same person. Is it realistic to expect two people to be sexual only with each other for two-thirds of their adult life? Even if it's not realistic, does a couple just need to accept that mutual monogamy is an eternal part of their lifetime relationship? If not, what are the alternatives? Opening up a relationship can feel threatening to either or both partners. They may be concerned about comparisons between sexual performance and appearance, or that what was agreed upon as a sexual encounter actually blossomed into a love relationship.

For some, cybersex has provided this alternative. They do not believe that it is possible to fall in love with someone over the Internet—and that, since they have not come into physical contact with the other person, it's not the same as cheating. Others disagree, believing that cheating in one's head is the same as actually doing the act.

Regardless of how you feel about cybersex and open vs. monogamous relationships, this issue makes a clear point any way you slice it: Communicating about expectations within a relationship is key, and something that should be revisited throughout the duration of the relationship.

