

Preventing online relationships from blossoming into affairs

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If you're single, Facebook and other social networking sites can help you meet that special someone. However, for those in even the healthiest of marriages, improper use can quickly devolve into a marital disaster.

A recent survey by the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers found that [Facebook](#) is cited in 1 in 5 divorces in the United States. Also, more than 80 percent of [divorce](#) lawyers reported a rising number of people are using social media to engage in extramarital affairs.

“We’re coming across it more and more,” said licensed clinical psychologist Steven Kimmons, PhD, of Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood, Ill. “One spouse connects online with someone they knew from high school. The person is emotionally available and they start communicating through Facebook. Within a short amount of time, the sharing of personal stories can lead to a deepened sense of intimacy, which in turn can point the couple in the direction of physical contact.”

Though already-strained marriages are most vulnerable, a couple doesn’t have to be experiencing marital difficulties for an online relationship to blossom from mere talk into a full-fledged affair, Kimmons said. In most instances, people enter into online relationships with the most innocent of intentions.

“I don’t think these people typically set out to have affairs,” said Kimmons, whose practice includes couples therapy and marriage counseling. “A lot of it is curiosity. They see an old friend or someone

they dated and decide to say ‘hello’ and catch up on where that person is and how they’re doing.”

It all boils down to the amount of contact two people in any type of relationships –including online – have with each other, Kimmons said. The more contact they have, the more likely they are to begin developing feelings for each other.

“If I’m talking to one person five times a week versus another person one time a week, you don’t need a fancy psychological study to conclude that I’m more likely to fall in love with the person I talk to five times a week because I have more contact with that person,” Kimmons said.

Stories of people whose marriages were destroyed by [affairs](#) that began on [social networking sites](#) abound on the Internet. It’s enough to make some people swear off online technology for life. Though there are no hard-and-fast rules to follow, there are some safeguards couples can apply to decrease the chance of online relationships getting out of control. For starters, do a self-assessment of why you’re using online sites.

“Look at the population of the people who are your online friends,” Kimmons said. “Is it a good mixture of men and women? Do you spend more time talking to females versus males or do you favor a certain type of friend over another? That can tell you something about how you’re using social networks. You may not even be aware that you’re heading down a road that can quickly get pretty dangerous, pretty fast to your marriage.”

Another safeguard is to spell out from the beginning with your online contacts what your expectations are of social networking relationships. Also, it’s a good idea to not engage in intimate conversation with someone who is not your spouse.

“From the start tell your online friend that you’re not looking for anything more than establishing old contacts with people to find out how they’re doing,” Kimmons said.

In some instances, couples could share passwords with each other and place the computer in a common area in the house or apartment.

“It’s not that people are going to read what you’re writing, but they’ll see what you’re doing,” he said. “Then it’s not a secret.”

Couples can also set parameters around how much time and when they are online each day.

“If you’re doing this at 2 o’clock in the morning with no one watching because you don’t want anyone else to know about it, that should be a signal to you that this is something approaching a boundary line or you’re at least moving in that direction,” Kimmons said.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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