

## **Is It Really Cheating? Understanding the Emotional Reactions and Clinical Treatment of Spouses and Partners Affected by Cybersex Infidelity**

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*The recent explosion in new portable electronic communication devices has generated the need for evolving clinical thinking about the meaning of spousal infidelity in the age of these new media. To further the understanding of the emotional reactions of those affected by Internet, Smartphone and social media-related infidelity, an online survey of spouses or committed partners of cybersex users was created and 35 responses analyzed. The results show that even when sexual behaviors are limited to online, partners can lose trust in their loved ones, feel the need to seek assistance, and identify themselves as victims of trauma. Further, the results show significant reports of negative consequences on the partners' relationships. Qualitative data offer support for the concept that partners' feelings and actions that were formerly considered indicative of codependency can be normative behaviors of trauma victims seeking to regain control of their lives. Recommendations for clinicians working with partners are presented.*

Prior to the 1990s, a period that brought about a sea change of interpersonal communication driven by the arrival of the Internet, someone wishing to have a sexual experience whether in or outside of a committed relationship

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had to negotiate and meet a potential affair-partner before starting that relationship. The late 20th century introduction of online life brought with it both unlimited computer-based admission to filmed and live sexual acts and unrestricted access to flirtation and sexualized interaction, without the need for close proximity to another person. This was accomplished via webcam and video streaming, computer-based interactive sex, adult infidelity chat rooms, online hook-up sites such as Craigslist, porn and online prostitution websites, online bulletin board systems (BBS), and porn file transfer sites. (Carnes, 2001; Cooper, Delmonico & Burg, 2000; Cooper, Griffin-Shelley, Delmonico, & Mathy, 2001; Cooper, Putnam, D.E., Planchon, L., & Boies, S.C, 1999; Cooper, Delmonico, Griffin-Shelley, & Mathy, 2004; Daneback, Ross & Mansson, 2006; Delmonico & Carnes, 1999; Dew, 2006; Ferree, 2003; Schneider, 2000a).

Beginning in the mid-1990s a person caught spending more time and energy communing with strangers at the other end of a webcam than attending to loved ones or family, could accurately say to a hurt and angry mate, “How can you call it *cheating* when I’ve never met her (or him)? They’re thousands of miles away, it’s not real, so stop calling it cheating and giving me a hard time!” The anxiety of someone who has just discovered in a computer browser that her partner has been spending 2–3 hours daily looking at porn and prostitute websites could be pushed aside with comments like, “Well it’s just a guy thing” or “My dad looked at magazines and I look online, what’s the difference? That’s just what guys do.”

Today we are again faced with rapidly evolving and profound technologically driven changes in social connection and human intimate and sexual interaction. This new media revolution is being driven by the evolution of social networks (Facebook, Twitter, MySpace), increasingly interactive websites, virtual world sex (Second-Life, MMORPG, Virtual games, etc.), smart phone sexting and live video streaming, 3-D filmed porn imagery and teledildonics, and smart phone “apps” that can geo-locate an available partner as readily as a local Italian restaurant. Defining what it means to cheat has become increasingly harder. An additional challenge of these newer technologies is that acts of infidelity are easier to hide and deny—for example, smart phone applications can be deleted leaving no visible trace of their existence and don’t offer a user activity history, unlike a computer browser.

With the increasing propinquity of electronic intimacy and even virtual sex (although this is still in an early stage), what exactly does it now mean to be unfaithful to one’s spouse? Is the effect of electronic infidelity on a spouse, partner, and/or relationship the same as the typical “affair” of the past? Is physical contact required in order to define *having an affair*? Do multiple hours of viewing online porn have the same effect on intimate relationships as time spent with the magazines and videos of the recent past? Or are fearful partners simply personalizing and overreacting to what many consider to be normative sexual behaviors? Spouses and partners who

feel anger, and fear, along with a sense that online affairs are as painful to them as “real life” affairs may themselves wonder whether their feelings are normal and expected responses or signs of some pathology. In the past, studies have attempted to answer these questions (Manning, 2006; Schneider, 2000b; Weiss & Schneider, 2006; Zitzman & Butler, 2009).

The recent explosion in new portable electronic communication devices has generated additional questions about partners of cybersex users. The goal of this article is to present the results of research about the effects of the new technology on partners of cybersex users and offer a framework for understanding partners’ responses to perceived relationship trauma

## METHODS

To obtain input from affected partners, a brief survey was created on the effect of Internet-based sex on partners of cybersex users. The survey was collected using the SurveyMonkey website. Various websites as well as Twitter and listserv inquiries were utilized to solicit survey participation via a link to the survey. The actual survey consisted of 28 questions including demographic, multiple choice, and open-ended questions. In this article the cybersex and smartphone consumer will be referred to as the “user,” the significant other as the “partner.” The study received IRB exemption from the George Washington University institutional review board since it consisted of anonymously gathered data with no link to personal identifiable information.

## RESULTS

The online survey was completed by 34 respondents, 29 female (85.3%) and 5 male (14.7%). Mean age was 44.3, with a range of 21–71. Sexual orientation was reported by 28 respondents as heterosexual (82.4%), 2 bisexual (5.9%) and 4 homosexual (11.8%). Collectively this was a highly educated group with 47.1% reporting a post-graduate degree and 35.3% identifying as college graduates. Regarding marital status, 16 responded currently married (48.5%), 8 were in a committed relationship (24.2%), 4 had separated (12.1%), 4 divorced (12.1%), and 1 was in a casual relationship. Demographic data are summarized in Table 1.

The observed cybersex behaviors or activities as reported by the partners were: viewing pornography alone (with or without masturbation) 17(51.5%); sexual chatting and viewing porn 9 (27.2%); and chatting and then later meeting up with that person 6 (18.1%). When asked specifically whether the user’s Internet activities extended to offline (real life) sexual activities, 11

**TABLE 1** Partners' Demographic Information (n = 34)

Gender	
Female	85.3% (29)
Male	14.7% (5)
Age	44.3 (21–71)
Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	28 (82.4%)
Bisexual	2 (5.9%)
Homosexual	4 (11.8%)
Relationship Status	
Married	16 (48.5%)
Committed Relationship	8 (24.2%)
Separated	4 (12.1%)
Divorced	4 (12/1%)
In a Casual Relationship	1 (0.3%)

partners said yes (32.4%) and another 10 were unsure (29.4%). Thus, only 13 (38.2%) were confident that the user's cybersex activities were limited to online activity and had not escalated to physical contact.

When asked how they learned of the user's online sexual activities, the majority of partners (21 or 62.5%) stated having found evidence on the user's computer, smart phone, or other device. In 7 cases (21.9%), the partner learned of the behavior through the user's actual disclosure of this information to him or her. Four partners (12.5%) walked in on the user during the course of his or her cybersexual behaviors. One partner only learned of the user's online sexual activities when he was arrested for voyeurism and subsequently admitted his Internet use.

With the increasing universal use of portable Internet-based devices (phones, pads, etc.), partners appear to be having more difficulty ascertaining whether or not they have been told the whole truth about the user's online sexual and romantic activity. When asked specifically about this, over half the respondents (18 or 52.9%) did not believe they had received a full disclosure and another 6 were unsure (17.6%). Thus, fewer than a third of partners (29.4%) expressed confidence that they knew the truth about their spouse's online sexual behaviors. Unsurprisingly, two-thirds of the partners (23 or 67.6%) attempted on their own to find out more information by going through the user's computer, smartphone, wallet, credit card statement, etc.

An overwhelming majority of the 34 respondents (30, or 87.5%) reported that the user's cybersex activities had created negative consequences for their relationship: Four (11.8%) said they have had some negative effects, 14 (41.2%) said the cybersex activities have significantly worsened their relationship, and 12 (35.3%) said that this was a primary contributor to the demise of their relationship. One person wrote that the user's cybersex use didn't change the relationship, while 3 (8.8%) said their relationship actually improved.

Overall, 24 partners (71.0%) reported having lost trust in their mate. Of 27 partners who responded to the question, “If trust has diminished, do you believe it can be fully restored?” 13 (48.1%) responded no, and another 6 (22.2%) were uncertain. Only 4 partners believed that trust could be fully restored (14.8%), while an equal number felt it could be partially restored. Of clinical significance was a reported loss of partner trust in relationships where the cybersex user lied about or underreported the degree of his or her Internet-related sexual activity. Two-thirds (64.5%) of respondents agreed with the statement, “My trust in him/her has really been broken,” and another two wrote that “I trust him/her less than before.” Table 2 summarizes the types of behaviors that the partners observed and their perceptions of the impact that the discovery of those behaviors had on the relationship.

The partners had multiple types of interventions. All but 1 partner reported having discussed their feelings about the cybersex activities with the user. Whereas 2 partners (6.1%) had only a brief discussion and 4 (12.1%) a

**TABLE 2** Partners’ Reports of Observed Behaviors and Perceived Effects on Relationship (n = 34)

Online Behaviors Observed	
Viewing pornography alone	17 (51.5%)
Sexual chat w/ pornography viewing	9 (27.2%)
Chatting w/ subsequent offline meeting	6 (18.1%)
Did Online Behavior Extend Offline?	
Yes	11 (32.4%)
No	13 (38.2%)
Unsure	10 (29.4%)
Discovery of Online Behaviors	
Found Evidence	21 (62.5%)
Disclosure	7 (21.9%)
Inadvertent Observation	4 (12.1%)
Arrest	1 (2.9%)
Belief that User Had Disclosed Full Extent of Behavior	
Yes	10 (29.4%)
No	18 (52.9%)
Uncertain	6 (17.6%)
Attempted Investigation by Partner into Extent of Behavior	
Yes	23 (67.6%)
No	11 (32.4%)
Report of Impact on Relationship	
Had an Overall Negative Effect	30 (87.5%)
Some Negative Consequences	4 (11.8%)
Significantly Worsened the Relationship	14 (41.2%)
Lead to the Demise of the Relationship	12 (35.3%)
No Change to Relationship	1 (2.9%)
Improvement in Relationship	3 (8.8%)
Can Trust Be Restored (n = 27)	
Yes	4 (14.8%)
No	13 (48.1%)
Uncertain	6 (22.2%)

general discussion, 26 partners (78.8%) reported discussing this repeatedly and in detail. Some users expressed remorse, promised to get help, and did.

Several partners reported that the user gave assurances and promises regarding behavior change, but didn't keep his word or did so only until the immediate crisis had passed. As a result of these discussions, 75% of the partners (24) reported that they, individually or as a couple, had put into place some changes, plans, or agreements designed to make them feel more comfortable. One partner's strategy was to end the relationship. Another moved out.

Several partners were comforted by the user's promises to stop and/or get help. Others reported having attended counseling, alone or with the user. Some put in place agreements regarding use of the computer. Examples include: the user would not access porn when the children are at home, the user no longer goes online without the partner present, the user has given the passwords to the laptop to the partner, the user installed Covenant Eyes or similar "porn blocking" software on computers, or blocked the Internet browser on the user's iPhone. Others wrote about focusing on 12-step recovery and therapy.

The survey asked partners the following question: "Given the increased ease of hiding one's cybersex activities due to the new portable devices, what strategies or agreements, if any, do you have in place for finding out if your mate continues or resumes engaging in these activities?" Of 28 usable responses 6 (21%) reported having come up with technology-related strategies. Seven other respondents (25%) reported trusting their own and/or the user's healing process. Twelve partners (42.8%) reported having no such strategies or agreements in place and two others reported having left the relationship.

In terms of seeking professional help, nearly two-thirds of the partners reported having sought counseling or help for themselves related to the user's cybersex activities. Of 23 who responded to this question almost all (91.3%) were seeing a counselor alone, half (56.5%) were seeing a counselor together with their mate, two thirds (65.2%) were attending 12-step meetings, and 21.7% were attending group therapy. In terms of self-help strategies, two-thirds (62%) reported they were reading helpful, related literature, half (56.5%) reported going online to research the issue and an equal number were talking it over with friend., and at least 6 reported talking over the issue with family. Table 3 summarizes how the partners handled the cybersex behavior.

Finally, the survey attempted to understand how partners categorized the cybersex user's behavior and their own responses, as well as how they believe the user categorized his/her own activities: 47.1% (16) or nearly half of the users reportedly self-identified as sex addicts; 38.2% (13) reportedly did not, and in 5 cases (14.7%) the partner didn't know. Two-thirds

**TABLE 3** Partners' Solutions to Cybersex Behavior and Views of the Cybersex User

Discussion (N = 33)	
Brief	2 (6.1%)
General	4 (12.1%)
Detailed	26 (78.8%)
None	1 (3.0%)
Strategies (n = 28)	
Technology related	6 (21%)
Healing Process	7 (25%)
Move Out	1 (3.5%)
End Relationship	1 (3.5%)
None	12 (42.8%)
Professional Help (n = 23)	
Individual Counseling	21 (91.3%)
Couples Counseling	13 (56.5%)
12-step Meetings	15 (65.2%)
Group Therapy	5 (21.7%)
Self Help (n = 23)	
Self-help Literature	14 (62%)
Online Research	13 (56.5%)
Discussed with Friends	13 (56.5%)
Discussed with Family	6 (26%)

of the partners (23, or 67.6%) stated that they regard the user as a sex addict; 20.6% (7) did not, and 4 (11.8%) were not sure. Slightly over half (19, or 55.9%) of the partners self-identified as “codependent” or “coaddicted.” Seventeen partners (51.5%) self-identified as feeling like a trauma victim or a trauma survivor as a direct result of the user’s online sexual activities. Table 4 demonstrates how the partners labeled themselves and their partners.

To bring these data to life, we have included some partners’ own words illustrating the above results:

Discovery:

- “I saw he was using my computer for porn in the browser history. When he got a smartphone he would lock his phone and would turn in the opposite direction so I couldn’t see his activity.”
- “I saw it in his email when I was using his iPod.”

**TABLE 4** Partners' Categorization of the Online Behavior and Their Own Role

Labeled the User a Sex Addict vs. User	
Self Identifies as a Sex Addict	
Yes	23 (67.6%) vs. 16 (47.1%)
No	7 (21.9%) vs. 13 (38.2%)
Uncertain	4 (12.1%) vs. 5 (14.7%)
Partner Labeled Self as a Co-Addict	19 (55.9%)
Partner Labeled Self as a Victim	17 (51.5%)

- “Initially he shared his porn and website interest. When we began to argue about it I began to check his online history and ultimately started to utilize spyware.”
- “Early on I walked in on him and saw porn on the computer in our office. He wasn’t able to click off it quickly enough and I saw it.”

Effect on the relationship:

- “We rarely spend any time together. His free time is spent on the computer half the night when he should be sleeping.”
- “Smartphones dramatically worsened his addiction by having this material available 24/7, while at the same time making it harder to locate and track his activities.”
- “It obliterated the trust in our relationship. I no longer believe a single thing he says.”
- “He became more and more withdrawn from the family as his addiction increased. I felt like I had all the responsibility for the family while he was ‘playing’ on the computer.”
- “We don’t have sex often and it irritates me that he puts more time into the porn than trying to be intimate with me.”
- “It has improved our relationship somewhat, since talking openly about porn led to better communication about sex. This has really helped our sex life and strengthened our relationship.”
- “I am glad he found an acceptable alternative outlet.”
- “I cannot trust him at all.”
- “Trust has been SHATTERED beyond belief.”

What it would take to restore trust:

- “A lot of time for me to see that my trust is well-founded. I don’t think my spouse realizes how much damage has been caused and what it will take to mend it.”
- “The two of us are receiving professional guidance through disclosure. To restore trust means having my husband be forthright and offer a thorough disclosure so that I do not fall prey to some new discovery.”
- “ $\text{TIME} + \text{TRUST} = \text{EARNED TRUST}$ ”
- “I think it is a fantasy to expect fully restored trust. For me, as time goes by and his behavior continues to match his words, I trust him more. Now my motto is ‘Trust, but verify.’”

Emotional effects on the partner:

- “I have been traumatized by the repeated discovery of his deception and betrayal of me with these activities.”



- “The denial of my reality resulted in my believing I was crazy. I became over the top with snooping, spying, trying to control the addiction, and thinking if I just did, then I could stop it. It caused complete erosion of my self-esteem, boundaries, and sense of self.”
- “Now I feel unattractive, ugly, wondering what’s wrong with me. I can’t sleep or concentrate. I’m missing out on life’s happiness, worried, scared all the time.”
- “I can’t trust him and struggle to trust others in my life. I want to be angry yet find myself hurt. I am heartbroken, depressed at times, frustrated, and confused to sum it up.”
- “I feel lonely and jealous of the computer. I have thoughts of getting my needs met elsewhere.”
- “I am devastated. I was blind to her faults due to love. I thought cybersex might spice up our marriage but it didn’t.”
- “I was too ashamed, hurt, and angry to let anybody else know. I was isolated.”
- “It created for me low self-esteem, doubted self-worth, blamed myself, am lost and confused, unable to complete or start tasks, little or no sex drive.”

Outcome of discussions with user about partner’s feelings:

- “He sought therapy.”
- “We continue to work the process of rebuilding our relationship. We have gone to marriage therapy, 12-step groups for couples, and individual 12-step and counseling.”
- “He keeps assuring me it won’t happen again. This is the 4th time I have confronted him.”
- “He promised to stop, to save our relationship, he offered to get help, but he has yet to do so.”
- “He denied it, stated that it was normal for men to do this, or tried to turn it around on me like I was the crazy one for not wanting porn in the house.”
- “He resents me completely and doesn’t want anything that might be close to accountability.”
- “He denies any cybersex activities and found a way to blame spam for its presence on the computer’s history.”

Plans or agreements for changes:

- “He no longer uses a smartphone and has a filter on his computer to which I do NOT have the password to since it makes me crazy. We have separate computers and phones so I don’t ‘spy’ on him, and he works out his side of the street with a sponsor and therapist and by taking medication.”
- “We continually work toward transparency. My husband has made available any property or activities that I feel the need to check. By virtue of his

openness, it has helped build trust. He activates supports when he goes out of town: calling sponsor, keeping me updated as to his activities or whereabouts (although I am not insecure the way I was during the first year after discovery).”

Technology-related strategies to confirm user’s behavior:

- “Messages he sends from his phone or computer come to my phone as well.”
- “He purposely doesn’t have a phone that can access the Internet.”
- “I’m using spyware on all devices; I will not be telling him about it.”
- “We removed the smart out of the smartphone, blocked the Internet browser on the phone, and are thinking about switching to a basic phone and blocking the Internet on it.”
- “I randomly ask to check his browsing history and emails.”
- “He doesn’t have a smartphone or Internet-capable phone and he shows me the phone history when asked.”

Trusting their own or the user’s healing process

- “My spouse has agreed to admit to any slips. I am pretty sure that now all have been revealed.”
- “I don’t monitor it. I ask if I have a suspicion. Hopefully, he is well enough in his recovery to tell me the truth.”
- “We talk about it.”
- “I have told him that his sobriety is up to him. My 12-step program has taught me that I can’t control it so let it go. I have accepted that ‘snooping’ and lie detector tests are horrible for my own recovery so I refuse to do them. If I am working my own program and am healthy, I trust my higher power to reveal to me what I need to know. If a sex addict is acting out, there are usually signs.”
- “As long as he is an active 12-stepper with a sponsor and a CSAT (Certified Sex Addiction Therapist) and he’s doing 12-step work.”

## DISCUSSION

### Lessons from the Survey

The findings of this survey confirmed that a cybersex user’s sexual activities cause a great deal of emotional distress to his or her partner, regardless of whether or not the user perceives the behavior as problematic. Partners stressed their traumatizing experience regardless of where or how the indiscretion occurred. About half (55.9%) believed they had been traumatized by the user’s online sexual activities. About half (51.5%) self-identified as

codependent or co-addicted. These categories sometimes overlapped. Much of the distress experienced by partners related to the uncertainty about the user's sexual activities, often related to the user's reliance on portable devices. Although initially only 18.1% of partners stated that the user's activities included connecting in person with a sex partner met online, in a later question one-third (32.4%) believed that physical contact had occurred, another third were unsure, and only 38.2% believed that only online sexual activities were involved. Only 22% of the cybersex addicts had voluntarily disclosed their activities before the partner discovered them. While some discovered the activities accidentally, many reported having checked the user's computer, iPhone, etc. because of their suspicions. As one partner wrote, "If you suspect something, try to find out because not knowing is more hurtful and worrisome than anything; use spyware or any other method to learn the truth." These types of snooping behaviors appear quite normative when there is a repeated discrepancy between the partner's suspicions and what the user tells them.

It is not surprising that after experiencing the pain of uncertainty, of betrayal, and of being lied to, partners are slow to trust and fearful of recommitting. Therapists treating this population need first to validate all of the partner's feelings and help them work through the initial stages of shock and grief. Only then can those who wish to continue in therapy be encouraged to do their own work. As one partner wrote, when asked what would be helpful to other partners, "You've got to take care of yourself, handle your own dependency issues first before entering or re-entering a relationship with an addict in recovery."

Recognizing the negative impact cybersex has on partners and relationships, it is important for partners to clarify and set out their own boundaries and what the consequences will be if these boundaries are breached. Some partners may simply ask the user to disclose any slips or relapses, but others want objective confirmation. One partner advised, "Encourage agreement for verification of computer logs, credit card summaries, and all phone records." Transparency on the part of the cybersex user can facilitate the restoration of trust.

This study reinforces the need to view cybersex behavior as a possible symptom of sex addiction. While not all users self-identified as sex addicts nor did all partners label the user as a sex addict, a significant number were labeled as sexually addicted. Furthermore, the qualitative data made several references to the addictive nature of the cybersex user's behavior. Hence, individuals who are brought to clinical attention for cybersex use should be screened for sexual addiction problems.

Finally, the survey also supported the idea that partners dealing with a cybersex user's behavior feel very isolated and that resources aimed at helping partners of sex addicts may also be helpful in this scenario. Several partners urged getting support from others: "I felt incredibly isolated before

I met other COSAs. [Codependents of Sex Addicts]. Sex addiction is not an easy thing to talk about with most people in my life. I was afraid (and probably still am) of being judged and having my husband judged.” Another advised, “Get help. Don’t try to do this alone. Don’t take on their shame. Get to a COSA meeting. Do the 12 steps. Focus on your issues and your recovery. Work on self-care.”

### Relationship Betrayal as Emotional Trauma

What becomes clear through examining the experience of those partners who responded to this survey is their near universal state of profound distress and a corresponding attempt to get effective help for themselves. These findings support the recent reframing of the diagnosis and treatment view of betrayed partners by clinicians specializing in the treatment of spouses or partners of sexual addicts (Steffens & Means, 2009; Steffens & Rennie, 2006; Tripodi, 2006). The most promising new clinical work in this arena stems from the idea that either sudden or protracted discoveries of sexual and/or romantic betrayal by a long-term partner represents a profound and recurring psychological trauma for those who endure it, similar to suddenly losing a job, child or home, and that the subsequent behaviors of those experiencing or learning of this relational betrayal (whether online or *in vivo*) are consistent with a trauma response. For these partners, repeated dishonesty on the part of their user/sex addict mate, who often denies the spouse’s questions, gut reactions, and instincts, is indeed traumatizing and traumatic. Most people in dependent, intimate relationships *want* to believe what their mate tells them, often ignoring their instincts that tell them something is wrong, often replicating the same inconsistency between head and heart as experienced in their childhood and family of origin system. Repeatedly faced with discrepancies between their internal emotional experience and the minimization or outright lies told them by their user/partner, spouses report themselves often feeling “crazy,” finding it difficult to trust their own judgment and conclusions. Moreover, partners in these gas-lighting circumstances (facing a continual denial of their truth) are equally denied the clarity needed to make healthy informed decisions about their own lives and futures—as they are not in possession of all the facts. By the time the truth is out, these partners often express feeling victimized not only by the user’s sexual behavior, but also of emotional abuse in the form of deception and denial.

Anger, fear, self-doubt, pain over the loss of past perceptions of the relationship, distrust, and shame, self-blame, and depression can be emotionally overwhelming to partners and spouses, causing symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, depression, and preoccupation. Betrayed spouses often express the need to know more and more detailed information in order to understand the past and avoid future pain, i.e., *to have control over an out-of-control situation*. To this end he or she may repeatedly search through

his computer files, portable devices, and belongings, attempt to keep careful track of the user's whereabouts, and engage in other "detective" type activities. Sadly, these behaviors and the related emotional responses (below), when viewed in the light of *betrayal trauma* can be considered normative.

These include:

- Feeling you are not a worthwhile or lovable person
- Doubting your own sexual attractiveness
- Neglecting your own needs and desires while focusing on others'
- Denying the seriousness of problems in your life
- Feeling responsible for someone else's behavior
- Setting boundaries or agreements but not following through with consequences
- Accepting sexual attention as a substitute for relational intimacy
- Substituting intensity in the relationship for intimacy
- Making excuses for the user's behavior and covering up for him or her
- Avoiding confronting these behaviors fearing abandonment
- Remaining in harmful situations too long

It is these very symptoms that have previously defined such terms as *sexual co-dependent* and *enabler*.

Cutting edge treatment today encourages treating clinicians to initially focus on helping spouses work through the grief, shock, and trauma of their betrayal experience, while placing much less initial focus on the details of their past or even the history of the current relationship. Subsequent therapy, if needed once the crisis period has passed, may then appropriately turn to examining the spouse's own life history, patterns of relationship behavior, and potential preexisting problematic patterns of intimate attachment.

The spouse who is cheated upon, if only through the user engaging in cybersex and virtual connection, may also be the partner who has had his or her reality previously denied by being consistently lied to and by having accurate feelings and questions invalidated. The partner who accurately senses and repeatedly asks the user about their emotional unavailability and sexual distance, only to be told that the partner is "making things up, too jealous or just plain crazy" is going to feel crazy after a while. When the truth of the user's behavior finally becomes known and the partner's worst fears are suddenly realized, partners can become emotionally and sometimes physically violent, while these or others may express intermittent bouts of depressive episodes.

Abandonment, denial of reality, and hurt can lead a spouse or partner to appear upon assessment as labile or even emotionally unstable. Sincere attempts to diagnose and treat the partner will fail in light of insensitivity by a clinician who dismisses the pain and reactivity as little more than an over-reaction by the spouse. The therapist who does not understand and support

the spouse's traumatic experience only serves to elevate the partner's traumatic arousal. Much as the *Follie-a-Deux* diagnosis implies that by intimately living with a psychotic individual long enough a non-psychotic spouse will also become emotionally disturbed, it seems likely that similar damage can be done to the emotional self-stability of a long-term partner whose accurate perceptions and feelings are consistently and often vigorously denied, thereby encouraging the symptoms of "codependency" described above.

A good framework for counselors working with partners of sex addicts in general and of cybersex addicts in particular includes the following elements:

- **Holding and Validation** of her reality and her feelings
- **Concrete Direction** regarding self-care, health issues, talking to family etc.
- **Education** about addiction, disclosure, family dynamics, support.
- **Disclosure and clarity** regarding their unknown history
- **Social support** in support groups, 12-step programs, therapy and helpful friends/family.
- **Structure** toward moving forward
- **Hope**

### So What is Cheating Anyway?

As previously stated, infidelity can be defined simply as *the breaking of trust and the keeping of secrets in an intimate partnership*. This definition is clear to any spouse or committed partner who feels cheated upon. Betrayed partners of cybersex abusers and sex addicts consistently report that it's not the cheating itself or any specific sexual act that causes them the deepest pain, it's the lying, denial of their own reality, and inability to maintain relationship trust. The most agonizing part for those who are being cheated upon is the betrayal of their trust in their mate. While some couples may choose to negotiate an open relationship or integrate Internet porn into their lives, it is the man or woman living a hidden sexual life who will cause the most harm to their loved ones. Not only does "the keeping of secrets in an intimate relationship" best define infidelity in terms of the pain of the spouse, but this definition allows for the accommodations and negotiations around sexual behavior that all couples have to go through.

### Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. The most important limitation is that this sample represents a convenience sample of individuals recruited anonymously on the Internet. There may be a bias since most of the

invitations to participate were obtained through listserv and treatment center websites that focus on sexual addiction. This may explain the high number of self-labeled and partner-identified sex addicts in the study. Hence, the results from this study cannot be generalized. For example, research has demonstrated that most individuals who engage in cybersex behavior report few, if any, problems (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000.). It would be important to understand how discovery of cybersex behavior in a relationship with no prior history of sexual indiscretion might be viewed by the partner.

Furthermore, given the low response rate to this survey, more sophisticated analysis could not be conducted. It would be interesting to see how sexual orientation, gender, and other variables impact how a partner responds to discovering cybersex use. Given that the survey was completely anonymous, we have little information on the health of each couples' relationship prior to the discovery of cybersex

Finally, since no screening tools or measures were used in this study, it is impossible to make conclusions on whether the partner meets the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder or any other clinical disorder. Further it is impossible to determine whether the user meets the criteria for sex addiction or hypersexual disorder. Future studies should aim at determining the impact of cybersex use using standardized rating scales to determine both pre and post health of each individual and the relationship.

## CONCLUSIONS

This survey confirms that many partners of cybersex users report feeling traumatized by the user's online infidelity, irrespective of the delivery method for infidelity. They report feeling cheated on, betrayed, and traumatized even when the user claimed to not have had physical contact with a sexual partner. The cybersex user's repeated deception and dismissal of the partner's concerns appear in and of themselves to be a significant contributor to the spouse's trauma reactivity. Another salient finding contributing to partners' distress was the large percent of partners who reported uncertainty regarding the extent of the user's sexual activities. This uncertainty has become more common in the era of mobile devices which maintain fewer records of the activities.

Some partners report engaging in behaviors, which historically were labeled borderline, co-addictive, or codependent, but in reality are resonant of a traumatic stress response by a person trying to obtain the information needed to make informed decisions and defend against further pain. These partners need validation of their experience of betrayal and deception both from the therapist and from others in a 12-step or other support group.

Nonetheless, it is well established that partners of sex addicts often grew up in dysfunctional families similar to those of sex addicts and often

experienced their own childhood wounds, in response to which they developed beliefs and actions that may have served them well at that time but that in later years have interfered with their emotional health. Given the close relationship to sex addiction found in this study, although we agree with the need to initiate treatment of partners using the trauma model, we believe that subsequently many partners can and will benefit from therapy that addresses their own relationship history, prior trauma and the existing dysfunctional core beliefs. We believe that it is a serious disservice to approach the treatment of partners from an either/or perspective, dismissing the traditional approach that focuses on helping the partner reclaim himself/herself, learn how to set boundaries, become more empowered, etc. as just another “blame the victim” or gender discrimination stance. Instead, what we are learning is that both approaches are important and are useful in treating partners of sex addicts and need to be incorporated to achieve the most effective recovery plan for partners.

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