

Emotional Affair: Learn the warning signs and protect your relationship

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

Do you believe you're immune to having an emotional affair?

I think you'll be surprised just how common and easy it is to head down the slippery slope of emotional infidelity.

The reality is that most people don't wake up one day and decide to be an unfaithful spouse or partner. An emotional affair often starts off as an innocent, platonic relationship. Many of the couples I work with are surprised to discover that their marriage or relationship is in jeopardy because one partner (or both) was having an emotional affair.

Why are people vulnerable to entering into an emotional affair? Because while the affair is blossoming, people often deny or minimize the significance of what is happening ("It's just innocent flirting" or "We're just friends"). Denial allows the emotional affair to crest long before the implications of the affair are fully realized.

Relationship Help: Emotional affair basics

A sexual affair is easy to identify—you're either having sex with someone other than your spouse/partner, or you're not. An emotional affair isn't always that obvious. For instance, is offering emotional support to a coworker you find attractive crossing a line? Should you keep your distance from everyone you find charming? Is there such a thing as "innocent" flirting?

Don't allow these shades of grey to obscure the fact that there are *clear* warning signs that you entering (and encouraging) an emotional relationship that is beyond a friendship.

Often the signs of an emotional affair have as much to do with your *behavior* as with your *feelings* for another person.

Let's turn our attention to the top ten warning signs of an emotional affair.

10 Emotional affair warning signs:

1. You start to say things to this person that you wouldn't if your spouse/partner was standing next to you. This is probably the most important litmus test to determine if the relationship is starting to cross the emotional affair boundary line.
2. You go out of your way to repeatedly "*run into*" this person. We all look forward to seeing people we enjoy—a particular friend or interesting colleague, for instance. If you're honest with yourself, however, you'll know the difference between a truly coincidental meeting and a "coincidence" that occurs because you stood around the office coffee machine for two hours (and you don't even drink coffee).
3. You put on your "*best face*" to impress this person. When you're entering into an emotional affair you go out of your way to be supportive, charming, funny, sympathetic... You deliberately act in ways to enhance your appeal—to be the best "you" possible.

Side note: These behaviors usually mirror how you behaved when you first dated your spouse/partner.

4. When the fires of an emotional affair are fanned, you begin to *anticipate* time spent with this person. Looking forward to spending time with someone other than your spouse or partner isn't inherently wrong or dangerous. But when the foundation of an emotional affair is being poured, this anticipation causes you to feel a longing and level of excitement that elevates the relationship beyond the platonic friendship status.

5. Is this person becoming the "*go-to person*" whenever something important occurs? While it is human nature to share the events of your life with the people most important to you, once you've entered the gateway of an emotional affair, your spouse/partner becomes less central in your emotional world as you share life's celebrations and struggles with this other person.

6. You begin *confiding* more and more in this person. When you confide in someone, you create a more intimate relationship by sharing information about yourself that isn't shared with just anyone. When you take someone in your confidence, you've elevated the relationship to "special" status.

Side note: A telltale sign of an impending emotional affair is when you begin to confide in this person about how unhappy you are in your marriage/relationship.

7. The relationship becomes charged with a *secretive, forbidden* energy. This creates an "us" dynamic that separates the relationship from all others—the relationship is designated as unique because of its secretive nature. This also imbues the relationship with excitement and an element of danger (in direct contrast to the ho-hum energy of your current relationship).

8. You begin to have discussions that deliberately move this person into the role of *caregiver*—this occurs when you start to share your deepest struggles, life's ambitions and intimate longings. These conversations create a powerful no-one-else-understands-me-like-you-do bond.

9. Before you know it, you can't help *comparing* the new person to your spouse/partner—and it should be no surprise that your partner fails to make the grade. In your mind's eye (and in the illusion of perfect love), all the differences that stand out for you indicate that this new person will be a superior mate and give you the happiness you long for.

10. You begin *lying* to your spouse/partner. When your partner asks about your day, you omit any reference to this person (and if your partner knows this person, you go out of your way to minimize his/her significance). This is a clear indication that you are stepping outside the commitment-boundaries of your marriage/relationship.

The goal of this list is to help raise your consciousness of how easy it can be to start down the road to an emotional affair. Everyone is vulnerable and it is your ability to recognize this fact that will help you protect your relationship.

Left unchecked, an emotional affair often leads to a physical affair. Too many good marriages and relationships have been destroyed because people deny and minimize the signs that an emotional affair is developing.

If you see yourself entering several of the above emotional infidelity danger zones, it will be important to hit the pause button on this new relationship before it's too late. The allure of an emotional affair can create the illusion that perfect love exists and is right around the corner. Rather than chasing this illusion, put your energies into discovering what might be missing in your relationship and the steps you can take to strengthen your relationship.

Are you ready to bring your relationship to the next level?

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If you haven't done it yet, don't forget to sign up for my monthly Relationship Toolbox Newsletter by going to http://www.strengthenyourrelationship.com/relationship_newsletter.html.

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Author Bio

Over the past fifteen years Richard Nicastro, Ph.D. has helped couples build stronger, more fulfilling marriages and relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

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