

How do You Define “Unfaithful”?

What’s your definition of “cheating”? If you’re like many of us, you may think it’s pretty obvious. We expect that our significant other is not kissing, intimately touching, or (of course) having sex with anyone other than ourselves. Romantic conversations, declarations of love, and major flirting? Also out of bounds.

But...wait. Let’s think about this a little more. What about going out for drinks with an old flame? Flirting with someone cute at the grocery store? Messaging with your ex on Facebook? Or... how about racy websites or chatrooms? And does your opinion change depending on whether you are dating, engaged, or married?

Seems like there’s actually a lot more to this conversation!

Definitions Vary

In fact, in a 2014 study of about 450 heterosexual college students, researchers found that people had widely varying definitions of what it meant to “cheat.” While 98% agreed that having sex with someone besides their partner was out of bounds, opinions differed on issues like sharing secrets with an opposite-sex friend or talking intimately with him or her. And in an interesting twist, people who were more insecure in their relationships were more likely to consider more casual interactions (like hugging briefly or calling for support about a work problem) to be cheating.

What about “electronic” cheating? This study did address that issue somewhat, with 80-90% of the students agreeing that “sexting” behavior counted as infidelity. However, that does leave about 10-20% saying it was not! Various surveys conducted across nations seem to indicate that opinions are mixed on this subject. Some polls show that men may be less likely than women to consider electronic activity like sending sexual texts or photos to be cheating. As for more anonymous electronic activity, like sexual chat rooms or online porn, some consider this totally out of bounds, while others find it to be okay.

Electronic Cheating Can be Very Damaging

However, there is definitely evidence that the partners of people who engage in “cybersex” activities often find it to be a serious breach of trust, even when no physical touching has occurred. In one small study, close to 90% of partners of people involved in such activities said it harmed the relationship. Specifically, about 70% said they’d lost trust in their partner. However, many of these respondents also identified a potential problem with sex addiction in their relationships. Not all users of such technology will have this issue.

Clarifying Your Own Relationship Rules

So, what should you do in your own relationship to prevent misunderstanding, loss of trust, and heartbreak caused by behavior that may be seen as infidelity? The answer is simple: be honest and communicate. Ask each other: where do we draw the line? What kind of behavior is okay and what is not, and why? (You’d be surprised by how many couples have never had this conversation.)

Your definition of what is acceptable and unacceptable may differ from those of other couples you know. Generally speaking, this is okay, as long as no one else is being harmed and there is no abuse or intimidation in your relationship. (For more on the difference between normal feelings of jealousy and abusive control, check out [this article \(https://www.domesticshelters.org/domestic-violence-articles-information/normal-jealousy-or-the-start-of-abuse#.WBo4ri0rKpo\)](https://www.domesticshelters.org/domestic-violence-articles-information/normal-jealousy-or-the-start-of-abuse#.WBo4ri0rKpo).) The most important thing, according to experts, is that you maintain each others’ trust and do not keep secrets. In fact, often, it’s the betrayal of trust that’s the most painful when infidelity does occur.

As we live our lives as people in relationships, we are bound to face various situations involving people outside our partnerships. Most of them are likely to be very minor, while others may be more significant. Maintaining honesty and openness with our partners and making expectations clear (while also ensuring that such agreements do not stray into overly controlling behavior) can help men and women keep their relationships strong.

Need Help with Your Relationship?

If you're in a relationship but need help with communicating about tricky topics like this one, why not consider taking a relationship education class? The SMART Couples project is offering ELEVATE, a FREE, research-backed relationship enhancement class for couples, in 5 Florida counties. [Sign up today!](http://smartcouples.ifas.ufl.edu/classesevents-/)

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