

When does a Harmless Flirtation become an Affair?

Sarah Elizabeth Malinak, M. Div.

Some would say there is no such thing as a “harmless” flirtation. I disagree. Humans flirt. It isn’t just a mating ritual; it is one of the many ways we communicate with each other, extending an invitation for various levels of closeness. When you are around babies and small children and begin cooing and talking baby talk, you’re flirting! It’s a way of letting others know you are safe and fun to be with. It is a way of getting close. However, among married or committed adults, harmless flirting can become an affair long before any physical act of passion takes place.

For simplicity’s sake, we’ll refer to married life in light of this issue. However, it is clearly true that the same advice can be applied to any committed relationship!

The shift from flirtation to affair happens before you begin doing the things in the list I have provided below. The shift happens when deep inside yourself you feel a sense of loyalty and belonging to this other person. You feel the rush of falling in love, even if you don’t call it that. A chemical reaction even happens in your body, allowing this stranger to feel like “home.” Then the following kinds of things begin to happen, sending up a red flag that you have crossed the line.

You can’t wait till the next time you text, instant message, call, or see that person.

You begin sharing things with him or her that you don’t share with your spouse.

You begin making a list of the things you look forward to sharing with your new friend.

You create experiences or conversations with this person that you are reluctant to share with your spouse.

All your spare thoughts are for and about the other person.

You dress for him or her, rather than for your spouse or even yourself.

The two of you begin sharing secrets.

You find that his or her cologne or perfume makes you feel warm and fuzzy.

You resent the time your marriage steals from your new friend.

At this stage of the game, you have an emotional affair underway. Now what? There are many things that need to happen if your first priority is to save your marriage.

First of all, understand that this emotional affair doesn’t mean your marriage is over. Your relationship does need attention. That is obvious.

Take responsibility for what you have created. Don't waste time playing the blame game, accusing anyone else for your lapse in judgment. Thank God for your ability to make new friends and then get busy taking your life back before it gets ruined.

Get clear about whether or not you wish to remain married. If this emotional affair is the last straw on an already burdened marriage that has been heading for divorce for some time, you need to be aware of that. However, if it was a lapse in judgment and you want to save your marriage, allow it to serve as a yellow flag that your spouse and your marriage need your attention.

Stop the behaviors that led you into this affair. Quit texting, instant messaging, and calling this other person. Quit sharing things with him or her that you do not want to share with your spouse. Quit having private lunches or any other private rendezvous.

You may have to tell your friend that while you appreciate the friendship, your family needs more of you and that it's time for you to turn your attention back to your family. I don't suggest acknowledging to your friend that the two of you are in the middle of an emotional affair. Not if you want to save your marriage.

If you want to save your marriage, your emotional state in light of your friend is actually none of his or her business. It is your business and it may be your spouse's business, but it isn't your friend's business.

Treat turning your thoughts away from this friend and back to your real life and the real loves in your life like a self-growth or spiritual discipline. You don't have to beat yourself up when you find your thoughts drifting to him or her. Simply turn your thoughts to something else, anything else that has to do with your real life. (I say real because unless this emotional affair is solid proof to you that your marriage is over, you are living a fantasy getting your emotional needs met this way.)

Talk to your spouse. Without blame, open the door for discussions about what the two of you need to do and how you need to be in order to strengthen your relationship. The emotional affair may have been an accident, but it is also a warning that your relationship is fragile and needs nourishment. Assure your spouse that your heart, your head, and your body are in the marriage. Be prepared to have that assurance tested by your spouse and your own thoughts and feelings.

Stick to the process with a renewed commitment to increase the intimacy and friendship between you and your spouse and the lapse in judgment that led to the emotional affair could turn out to be a true gift.

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There is a secret to relationship success that is direct, simple, and effective. We and others have used it to transform marriages that felt burdensome and hurtful into marriages filled with love and satisfaction.

You can discover this secret for yourself in the e-workbook called *Creating the Love You Want: Five Unique Steps to Improve Your Marriage*. Go to <http://www.CreateTheLoveYouWant.com> and order your copy right now. With it, you can begin making a difference for yourself tonight!