

Unfaithful Friendships: Understanding and Preventing Extramarital Relationships – Ask an Expert

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Friendships are vital to our lives, providing support, companionship, and joy. However, the boundaries between friendship and romance can sometimes blur, creating a slippery slope that can lead to wrecked relationships, heartache, and regret. Unfaithful friendships, where a friendly relationship crosses the line into emotional or physical infidelity, are more common than many people realize. Results from [U.S. surveys](#) of adults reveal that people most commonly report having extramarital sex with a close personal friend (53.5%) or neighbor, coworker, or long-term acquaintance (29.4%).

Warning Signs of Unfaithful Friendships:

- **Emotional intensity:** Sharing intimate details with someone other than your partner, reaching out on social media, looking for reasons to text, seeking emotional support, and prioritizing their opinions over your partner's can indicate an unhealthy attachment.
- **Secrecy:** Keeping your interactions with your friend or co-worker secret from your partner is a warning sign. If you need to hide texts, calls, social media comments, or meetings, it suggests that the relationship could be crossing boundaries.
- **Physical affection:** While friendly hugs may be acceptable in some situations, prolonged physical

contact, flirtatious touches, or increased physical closeness can indicate the relationship is becoming more than friendly.

- **Time together:** Finding ways to spend excessive time with someone other than your partner can lead to emotional and physical distance and strain your marriage.
- **Comparisons:** Frequent mental comparisons of your partner to your friend, especially in a favorable light, can indicate that you are developing unfaithful feelings. These comparisons can be compelling and even exhilarating but ultimately misleading. Your emotions can blind you, causing unwise comparisons that can erode your satisfaction with your partner.

Unfaithful friendships can lead to significant emotional damage to all parties involved, including children and extended family. The betrayal of trust can be devastating, often leading to feelings of anger, sadness, and insecurity. Broken trust is challenging to rebuild, and the emotional and psychological scars can linger for years. The impact of such betrayals can lead to depression, anxiety, and often an end to the relationship. The other person involved will also likely experience guilt and shame.

For her book, "Couples in Crisis," Debra Macleod interviewed more than 300 couples who experienced infidelity to learn where they met their affair partners. She discovered they often begin where people spend significant time and share common interests. Being aware of these environments can help individuals recognize and prevent situations that might lead to infidelity.

Potential locations where affair partners meet:

- **The office and workplace:** Many affairs start with casual friendships at work. People often look and act their best, even offering a compassionate listening ear, making them more attractive to others. Shared goals, creative energy, and passion for projects can increase receptiveness to admiration or interest from co-workers.
- **The gym:** Gyms are a frequent setting for affairs to begin due to the physical and emotional closeness that can develop between people, including personal trainers. Add physically attractive and fit bodies and little clothing coupled with a testosterone spike that increases sex drive, and it is a potential recipe for disaster.
- **Social media:** Social media platforms provide an easy way to reconnect with old flames. The nostalgia for "the good old days," coupled with loneliness and curiosity, can lead people to fantasize about

what their lives could have been, which can lead to frequent messaging that can quickly escalate into a deeper emotional connection.

- **Friends and social circles:** Countless affairs start within existing social circles, including close friends the couple spends time or vacations with. Proximity, familiarity, and activities together can lead to increased intimacy, making it easier for inappropriate relationships to develop.
- **Church and volunteering:** Church settings can create a false sense of intimacy, especially when people share personal struggles and seek comfort. This openness can lead to emotional attachments, especially between church members or members and leaders. Similarly, volunteering for a common cause can create a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose. This shared energy and commitment to a cause can make individuals more vulnerable to forming attractions and emotional bonds.

Possible signs of an affair:

- **Increased secrecy:** If a partner is secretive about interactions with co-workers, friends, gym buddies, social media friends, or fellow volunteers, it could be a warning sign.
- **Emotional distance:** If you notice your partner becoming emotionally distant, moody, or overly critical, it may be a sign they are emotionally invested elsewhere.
- **Time investment:** Spending excessive time with someone outside the relationship, especially in the settings mentioned above, can be a red flag.

Tips to avoid unfaithful friendships:

- **Set and keep clear boundaries:** Create clear boundaries with your partner about interactions with colleagues, gym friends, social media contacts, and other friends. Boundaries may include no one-on-one time, no late-night meetings together, and no discussing of deeply personal topics.
- **Stay connected:** Maintain open communication and prioritize emotional intimacy and connection with your partner. Regularly check in with each other and share your feelings, social activities, work life, and other interactions. Transparency builds trust and reduces the chances of secrecy, and open communication helps keep you on the same page about acceptable behavior.
- **Prioritize your relationship:** Spend quality time nurturing your emotional and physical connection to

your partner. Give them all your heart and attention – don't let it wander or make them wonder. Choose to go "all-in" by focusing exclusively on your partner.

- **Involve your partner:** Include your partner in your social interactions with friends. This can help prevent the development of inappropriate bonds and emotions and ensures that your partner feels included and valued.
- **Reflect on your intentions:** Regularly assess your feelings and intentions toward friends. If you develop romantic feelings, recognize those subtle or strong feelings and take a step back and refocus on your primary relationship.
- **Seek support:** If it is challenging to maintain boundaries, consider seeking support from a therapist. Professional guidance can help you navigate complex emotions and reinforce healthy relationship practices.

Unfaithful friendships are a significant threat to marital happiness. Being aware of the common places where affairs can begin, recognizing warning signs, and taking proactive steps to set boundaries and prioritize your partner can prevent friendships from crossing into romantic territory. Remember that vigilance, honesty, and a commitment to preserving the integrity of your primary relationship are essential. By doing so, you can foster a healthy, resilient, and fulfilling relationship with the person to whom you promised your loyalty and love.

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