



Crossing the line

Relationship therapist James Earl on navigating an emotional affair.



When does an emotional connection with a third party threaten our primary relationship? And when are we crossing the line?

These are questions that almost every couple has to face at some point – either because our partner seems to be overly close with a friend or colleague, or because we ourselves have developed feelings for someone.

Every couple is different, of course, about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. At the same time, terms like ‘emotional affair’ are common enough to suggest that maybe there are some universals about what’s OK and what isn’t.

So what is an emotional affair? How does it differ from an affair? Is it less – or possibly more – serious, than a physical affair?

Most people still choose to be in a monogamous relationship (although being open or polyamorous is more common than 20 years ago). We are all aware that being exclusive is quite a difficult ideal – not that it’s difficult to follow the rules, but it’s difficult to always want to follow them.

Curiosity about other people is a normal part of the human condition, and while we may daydream about an exciting new sexual encounter, sex is not what drives most affairs (certainly not at the beginning, anyway). Rather, we all love finding a connection with someone. It’s a feeling of being seen and heard.

This feeling of being ‘seen’ often goes missing in a long-term relationship, so when it happens – often completely unplanned – it feels genuinely exciting. It’s all about self-discovery and recapturing a missing, youthful part of ourselves, and our inclination is therefore to pursue it.

It is often initially hard to know if this is any more than just making a new friend – except perhaps we are aware of a growing sense of excitement and attraction.

A good primary relationship should allow each partner the freedom to form friendships without any control or questioning. But there is a point where this goes beyond the platonic – without being overtly sexual. Perhaps we are sharing some deep feelings, discussing our primary relationships with the new person, or just making each other laugh in a way that feels something like the early stages of falling in love. We spend more time with them, seeking them out for fun and connection, which may feel absent in our primary relationship.

We may be aware that we would rather keep this new friendship from our partner – and this is usually the warning sign that we may be crossing a line. However, since nothing has happened that overtly

breaks the rules – like sex – we may feel we have ‘plausible deniability’. Often, this is as much about kidding ourselves as keeping our partner in the dark.

Flirting in this type of close emotional relationship may be entirely absent. It may be that we cannot allow ourselves any obvious suggestion of sexual interest, because this would make the friendship impossible if we are both committed elsewhere. And the absence of sex allows the deepening of an emotional bond that can become more intense than mere ‘fancying’.

At the same time, if at any point either friend decides to make their sexual attraction clear, it may escalate quickly into an actual affair. This can happen even where there is no actual physical sex. For example, when constant texting moves from friendly, to curious, to suggestive – before long, two people may find themselves in an escalating choreography of intimate conversation. Sexting. And sexting is very exciting for most people because it requires an exciting verbalising of our wants, which in physical sex is not necessary.

All this is heady and seductive – a feeling not so synonymous with a long-term partner, who we may love but see in a more comfortable, rather than erotic, role.

In my view, the key thing here is to recognise what is happening early and – as is the intention of all therapy – to avoid too much self-deception. Would this relationship make your partner uncomfortable? If the tables were turned, would you feel uncomfortable with the situation? If so, you may be at the start of an emotional affair.

These situations are common – but it is up to you whether you decide to pursue it or not. Perhaps the situation is telling you it’s time to bring the fun back with your significant other. And, if you become aware of your partner’s interest in another person, this is just as important!  jamesearl.com

Emotional affairs A quick checklist

- Are you dying to spend time with your friend?
- Does your friend make you feel seen and heard?
- Are you texting all the time?
- Are you sharing personal details of your life?
- Are you aware of sexual attraction or fantasy?
- Would this make your partner uncomfortable if they knew?