

How to Handle Emotional Betrayal

QUESTION: My wife and I have been married for 7 years. I have always trusted her until several months ago when I discovered that she has been secretly talking to another man on her cell phone. She said that he was someone who used to work at her company who is now in business for himself.

Apparently, they started talking to each other a lot before he left the company six months ago. They have been talking five or six times a day for the past six months. My wife says that they sometimes meet for lunch or coffee, but she swears that they haven't had sex. For some reason, I'm inclined to believe her, but I can't accept the situation continuing.

My wife says there's nothing wrong with talking to another man since they haven't had sex, and that he's just a really good friend who's easy to talk to.

Am I being unfair or unreasonable? What do I do?

RESPONSE: No, you're not being unfair or unreasonable. This has gotten to be a fairly common problem because cell phones make it so much easier for people to have secret conversations with others. The spouse often never suspects that the partner is having intimate conversations with someone else on the way to work, at break, at lunch, driving home, on the way to the grocery store, while in the bathroom at home, etc.

The spouse who is confronted about the secret conversations often defends what's happened by saying that it's okay because the other person is just a friend. In some cases, that's true, and in others, the two individuals have been involved in an affair. You may never know for sure which is true in your case. But it almost doesn't matter on

one level whether there was actual physical sexual intimacy or not. I don't mean that it's not important, but it's not the defining criteria for whether betrayal occurred or not.

This is a sensitive area and the lines sometimes become blurred, but there are markers to indicate when a line from "okay" to "not okay" is crossed. Yes, it's okay to have friends of the opposite sex, in your personal life or at work, but it's also an area full of landmines. Why is this?

This is because when you start confiding personal details of your life and sharing on an emotional level, you are starting to form an emotional connection and attachment. The sense of intimacy can deepen the more you share, and there can be a feeling that the other person understands you and is easier to talk to than your spouse is. The deepening of emotional intimacy can activate feelings of sexual attraction, whether they are ever acted on or not.

Then add the element of secrecy as you share things you wouldn't want your spouse to know you shared and you start having secret conversations—in person and by phone—with the other person. This dynamic is similar to what happens in a physical affair when secrecy magnifies the intensity of the relationship. All of this is tricky, shaky ground and it's easy to take a misstep that was never planned.

Tips for Repairing Your Marriage's Foundation

Yes, your wife "crossed the line" with the other man when she began having secret conversations with him that she didn't tell you about and also when the frequency of the calls accelerated to numerous times each day.

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It's one thing to have a friend of the opposite sex who calls occasionally when there's a crisis in his or her life and asks for some advice or temporary support of you or your wife, and you mention the call to your spouse. It's quite another to be talking secretly to someone of the opposite sex numerous times every day for six months. *I would consider this an example of emotional betrayal.*

Why? In addition, it provided an escape from having to deal with the marriage problems head on. Instead of talking to the male friend, your wife could have been putting her efforts into talking with you directly, instead of talking about you to the friend. So I see the friendship as having diverted and stolen energy, time, focus, and commitment from your marriage. And it hurt your relationship and damaged the trust between you when you found out.

Knowing all of this, then, what should you do? It's definitely not acceptable for the secret phone conversations and contact between your wife and the friend to continue if your marriage is going to survive and be a quality one. It would be ideal if you and your wife could see a marriage counselor to work on repairing the trust and improving the communication and intimacy in your marriage.

One of the keys to making this work is for you to see the situation as one that you and your wife have both contributed to. Both spouses always, in some way that may not be obvious at first, share responsibility for what happens in the marriage.

Focusing on blame will reduce your chances of creating a win-win outcome.

Instead, view this as a "crack" in the marriage foundation that needs work to repair, and it needs prompt attention. Look at what you can do to help promote a deeper sense of intimacy in your relationship with your wife.

Here are some questions to consider:

- ❖ Are the two of you spending much time together?
- ❖ Do you still go out on "dates"?
- ❖ Do you sit and talk for at least ten or fifteen minutes each day?
- ❖ Do you know how to share feelings easily?
- ❖ Are you emotionally supportive of your wife?
- ❖ Do you take the time to be romantic by doing little things like giving her a special card or flowers?
- ❖ You don't have to spend a lot of money. You can write romantic notes or present her with one perfect rose as a symbol of your love.

Be creative and proactive and see what is possible in transforming your marriage. The "wake up call" of finding out about the secret phone conversations may turn out to be the catalyst for you and your wife to transform your marriage into one that better meets the needs of both of you.