

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I believed that I was happily married to my husband, Joe, until I found numerous emails that he has exchanged with a woman named Penny who lives across the country. From the dates on the emails, this has been going on for more than six months. Though not explicitly sexual, the letters are filled with what I would call “flirty” comments. I confronted him and at first he was angry that I looked at his email (which was hidden in a password protected file) and then he told me to ‘get over it.’ He says he’s never met Penny in real life and has no intention of doing so. He spends hours online after dinner in chat rooms with this woman and I told Joe that his flirting hurts me. He says it is a harmless diversion and that I’m overreacting. He doesn’t want to talk about it.

-- Juliet

Dear Juliet,

There are a number of serious red flags in your letter that indicate problems on the home front, and they also suggest that an honest heart-to-heart conversation with Romeo is long past due.

First of all, you should make it clear to Joe that he doesn’t have to be having sex with another woman to be guilty of cheating. Joe may not believe that, but all the relationship experts certainly do. The fact that Joe was upset when you discovered his virtual relationship, suggests to me that he may not really believe that his Internet correspondence is as innocent as he would like you to believe. Why would he password protect this file, if he really believed that the contents were nothing for you to get excited about? This is sneaky behavior, and relationships can’t thrive when one member is underhanded. You already know this. This lack of trust is evidenced by the fact that you felt compelled to surreptitiously check his private email. Truly, how comfortable and at ease are you in your marriage if you are sitting at his computer trying out various passwords?

It’s clear that emotional infidelity can be every bit as destructive to a marriage as an actual affair. Cyber-affairs (whether or not they culminate in an actual sexual relationship) are increasingly being cited in divorce proceedings, according to the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers. You might want to check out the psychological resources section on the website for the Center for Online Addiction (www.healthyplace.com then click on “Communities”). Perhaps, this information will add some credence to your point that Joe’s disloyal behavior is to be taken seriously, and that you are not just “overreacting” to his virtual affair.

There are several other important warning signs in your letter that suggest your marriage needs a serious tune-up. The first is the amount of time Joe is spending away from you in the evenings, and the second is the fact that he so easily dismisses your feelings.

You have a right to be upset with Joe for spending hours online after dinner. Even if he were doing nothing more than playing Spider Solitaire, browsing Civil War battle websites, or exploring the finer points of the eating habits of wasps, he is giving you very little attention. You should – and must -- demand more from your marriage. When was the last time he was “flirty” with you? When was the last evening you went for a walk together, played cards, shared a movie, or – here’s a novel thought – had a conversation after dinner? These are the kinds of activities that make a marriage strong, and bring you closer together as a couple. Of course, partners in a marriage need some time to pursue individual interests – that’s healthy and good -- but spending hours after dinner online is over the top.

Finally, Joe’s offhand dismissal of your feelings, and his refusal to talk about this problem are indicative of serious communication problems. I suggest marriage counseling to get your relationship back on track.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) All of the “Your Personal Coach” columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.