

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I have been married to Todd for almost 10 years, but in the last year or so I've developed strong feelings for my co-worker, Nick. We have not had an affair, but we meet for lunch at least twice a week, and email each other regularly. Todd has no idea. Nick is also married, but he flirts right back with me. I can talk to Nick about everything: my dreams, my goals, even my problems with Todd. I'm feeling guilty, but really, why should I? We haven't done anything. Do you have some advice for how I can handle these guilty feelings?

-- Amy

Dear Amy,

Danger, Will Robinson! Danger! This is a thin ice alert! Amy, just because you haven't slept with Nick, doesn't mean you haven't done "anything." In fact, you have been doing something. You've had regular lunch dates with mutual sexual attraction and flirting on the menu. This may not qualify as an "affair" in the strictest sense of the word, but your behavior is less than honest with your husband, and you and Nick are putting your respective marriages in jeopardy.

I suspect you are feeling guilty because – at some level – you know that this "innocent" flirting is not what you should be doing with a co-worker. Ask yourself this question: Would I feel hurt or betrayed if I learned that Todd was also having lunch and emailing one of his other female co-workers? If the answer to this question is "yes," then your guilt feelings are giving you a strong signal to cut it out. Rather than trying to make your guilt go away, I suggest you listen to its message: Cease and desist this kind of contact with Nick.

Many people assume that marital infidelity only occurs when there is a sexual relationship with someone other than your spouse. That kind of cheating is clear. But you are engaging in an emotional affair that can be just as disruptive and harmful to your marriage as the more steamy kind. I'm not suggesting that you should not have friends – close friends and even men friends – but I think you have crossed the line from platonic to romantic with the mutual flirting. You're giving Nick a level of emotional intimacy that you are denying Todd. That's not fair. The fact that you have kept your 'friendship' with Nick a secret from your husband tells me that you realize this.

Amy, you're not alone. Social science researchers suggest that between 8 and 10 million romantic relationships are formed in workplaces every year. Some of these are between single people, but many involved are married, just like you. Family therapist Shirley Glass conducted research, and found that it is not just people who are unhappily married or thrill-seekers who are engaging in this kind of affair. "The new infidelity is between people who unwittingly form deep, passionate connections before realizing that they've crossed the line from platonic friendship into romantic love," she wrote in *NOT 'Just Friends': Protect Your Relationship From Infidelity and Heal the Trauma of Betrayal*. You might want to check out this book.

I realize that your letter asked me about ridding yourself of guilt feelings, but I think that is impossible until you begin to think more clearly about your interpersonal boundaries. Among Shirley Glass' suggestions: discuss relationship issues at home, don't lunch or take private coffee breaks with the same person all the time, discuss your online friendships with your partner, and surround yourself with friends who are happily married and committed to the idea of fidelity.

If your marriage to Todd is not satisfying, then work with him to make it so, or decide to leave him. Just don't unconsciously fall through this thin ice; you may already be in deeper than you intended.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2006 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.