

5 Wise Steps to Take if You Find Your Spouse in an Emotional Affair

It might seem simpler, though even more devastating, to walk in and find your spouse in bed with someone else. Emotional cheating is squishier. You—and your spouse—may find it easier to come up with excuses and rationalizations. You may wonder if you're the problem. You may find it difficult to trust your own intuition or senses. But if your spouse is emotionally cheating, ignoring the problem won't make it go away.

Emotional affairs are real and dangerous. They often lead to physical affairs, but that's not the point. Both men and women are vulnerable here. Rationalizations are easy: "He meets my emotional needs in a way my husband doesn't." "We're helping each other spiritually and praying together." "She understands and validates me professionally."

But your heart is drawn away. Whether or not your clothes eventually come off, the damage to your marriage and to your own soul is significant. That's what Jesus meant when He said, "But I say to you that whoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matt. 5:28).

The state of your heart matters.

Protecting your own heart from an emotional affair is only possible through God's grace. But this is especially for husbands and wives who suspect—or know—that your spouse is doing the emotional cheating.

What Is Emotional Cheating?

First, what's the criteria for emotional cheating? Are all

friendships with someone of the opposite sex, other than your spouse, forbidden? What about work colleagues, church friendships or ministry partners?

That could take a long time to answer. But here's the bottom line:

Never allow emotional, physical, or spiritual intimacy with anyone to become as great as or greater than the emotional, physical and spiritual intimacy between you and your spouse.

That means if your marriage is struggling in one of these areas, you and your spouse will have to take extra precautions to preclude closeness with anyone of the opposite sex. Ferociously guard your heart. Only be vulnerable with another person not your spouse if they are a same-sex believer or a professional helper. (And a professional helper the same sex as your spouse can also be dangerous. Be careful even in choosing professional helpers.)

That may seem extreme, but the results otherwise are too dangerous.

So now, what do you do if you know or suspect your spouse is emotionally cheating?

What You Can Do

- **Check Your Facts**

Facts may seem hard to come by when you're dealing with emotional cheating, but they're important. Why do you suspect your spouse is emotionally cheating? What are the indicators? Do you see text messages or other clues? Is your spouse investing less in your relationship than they previously did? Are they spending more time and energy at work, church or online than previously? Are they being secretive when you ask about certain things? Are there other things going on in your spouse's life that would adequately explain any changes you

are noticing?

Realize that your own feelings and intuition are often the most sensitive indicator, but they are just that—your feelings and intuition. It's possible to be overly jealous and controlling. It's also possible to miss or ignore warning signs for a long time. Do your best to step back and evaluate your own assessment of your marriage and your spouse's behavior.

If necessary, get some feedback from a trusted Christian same-sex friend. Don't ignore your own heart in the situation; it's possible your own intuition may be God's way of alerting you to something you can address in your marriage before things deteriorate further.

- **Check Your Own Heart**

Before you confront or blame your spouse, take a look at your own emotions, investment in the marriage, personality and spiritual sensitivity. Your spouse is always responsible for his/her own behavior, but in the same vein, you are also responsible for your own.

Ask yourself questions such as: Am I being unreasonably jealous or controlling? Have I contributed to making my spouse feel unsafe or diminished in our marriage? Am I working to address any barriers to intimacy I brought into the marriage? Am I harboring bitterness or anger toward my spouse? Am I increasingly learning to rely on God first to meet my needs instead of looking to my spouse to give me what they do not have to give?

Your honest answers to these kind of questions do not absolve your spouse from their responsibility, but your self-assessment will help you approach the issue with humility, honesty, openness, courage, respect, and love.

▪ Talk

Oh, the dreaded “We need to talk.” Yes, you will have to go there. Choose the time, place and setting where you know your spouse will be most able to listen and communicate. Go into the conversation prayed up. If you feel the need, have a trusted Christian same-sex friend praying for you as you do so.

Your goal in this conversation is to understand, not to blame or belittle your spouse. Use your own words, but the message you convey should be something like this: “Honey, I love you and I want our marriage to be strong and thriving. I’ve been concerned about some things I’ve noticed recently. I’ve noticed you [simply state any behaviors or changes you’ve noticed]. I’m having a difficult time putting this together, and I don’t want to let this become a bigger wall between us. Will you help me understand what’s going on?”

Then listen. Listen to both the words and non-verbal communication your spouse presents. Your goal is to understand. If your spouse puts up a major roadblock to communication, that itself may help you know what’s going on. If they offer reasonable explanations and demonstrate openness to working on intimacy together, you may have saved your marriage from further hurt. If they admit to an emotional affair and ask forgiveness, you know what you need to work on to rebuild trust.

▪ Set Healthy Boundaries

If your talk reveals areas in your relationship where you and your spouse can work together, you’re in a very good place. If you need some professional marriage help, get it. If you can both commit to shoring up the intimacy between you, do so.

If your talk reveals that your spouse is having an emotional

affair and is unwilling to work on your marriage, or if there is no effective communication at all between you, don't feel you are powerless. Setting healthy boundaries in a relationship as intimate as marriage may seem counterintuitive, but it's important.

You have many choices. You can state clearly and without anger the steps you will take until and unless your spouse commits to working on your marriage. You can get help for yourself—online resources, books, therapy from a pastor or counselor and so on. You can invest in your own growth and maturity regardless of what your spouse does or doesn't do.

- **Stay on Your Knees**

Regardless of the results of the previous steps, you will need God's intervention in your own heart and in your marriage. Pray before, during, and after every step in this journey. Pray that your own eyes are open to what is going on in your marriage, the part your own behavior may or may not be playing, and the best way to communicate with your spouse. Pray that any unreasonable jealousy or control in your own heart be changed, for freedom from false guilt or shame, and that you conduct yourself with your spouse in the way God needs you to do so. Pray that the Holy Spirit will intervene in your spouse's heart and mind as only He can.

Every single marriage will go through challenges. Every relationship is vulnerable to emotional cheating. The important question is, what will you do next? Who is God calling you to be to your spouse right now?

God can and does restore marriages where humanly speaking there was no hope. Remember, both you and your spouse have a vote. You cannot control the outcome.

Staying on your knees will allow God to do His work in your own life and in your relationship. Don't move forward without

Him.

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