

Catching the Cheater in an Online Affair, a Private Investigator's View

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Summary:

This paper explores the rise of the online affair that has coincided with the increased use of digital communication methods such as smart phones, computers, laptops, etc. Relationships that often start online with innocent thoughts and intentions more often than not develop into deep emotional attachments that significantly damage existing relationships. The online relationship can lead to physical infidelity with an initially virtual partner.

The Rise of the Online Affair

Infidelity and adultery have existed as long as committed relationships; however, in recent years, it has become much easier to cheat on your partner, both physically and emotionally. To cheat, you do not need to go on secret dates or look for secluded places anymore. Using only the Internet connection of your computer or cell phone, you can enjoy digital communication with your lover from any part of the world. Western society has recently seen a new form of infidelity arise - the online affair.

The majority of those affairs often start with innocent thoughts and intentions, with individuals merely looking for a casual conversation and to have fun. However, more often than not, these playful friendships develop into deep emotional attachments that are very hard to break and can significantly damage any existing relationships. The consequences are comparable to those of a real-time physical affair, with consequences such as emotional detachment and withdrawal, loss of sexual interest, and reduced attention to one's family and significant other. Additionally, such affairs can potentially lead to a physical infidelity with the initially virtual partner.

In most cases, the partner who is being cheated on is unaware of the infidelity, especially when the victim is female. According to one study, only one-third of women whose husbands cheated on them found out about it, while the rest stayed ignorant of the adultery. This significant proportion is because most people are emotionally wired to fully trust their partner, thus ignoring any suspicious behavior.

Signs of infidelity

Sometimes you cannot help notice that something is not going right. You may see your partner spend more time on the Internet when you are away, feel them grow moody or emotionally distant, or notice a new dynamic in their sexual interest. Additionally, there are some telltale signs of infidelity, such as your partner suddenly changing email, social network account, and cell phone passwords, obsessively clearing call and message logs, and closing or changing windows on their computer the moment you walk into the room – if you spot any of these behaviors, you have every right to feel suspicious.

However, once suspicious, how should you proceed? Most people take it up with their spouse, asking either direct or implicit probing questions to figure out if they are being told the whole truth. However, this honest and fully ethical tactic can sometimes backfire. By asking questions without having any proof of the affair, you let your partner know about your suspicions, thus enabling him or her to better hide his or her tracks. Instead of admitting to cheating, the cheater

will tell you what you want to hear and, once you are reassured, will continue with the virtual affair behind your back.

What is the best solution to avoid such a situation? The answer is simple – by gathering evidence. Whereas in the past the only options were to personally follow your partner or to hire a private investigator to spy on them, now all you have to do is get hold of their cell phone or personal computer. With modern-day technology, every adulterer leaves a digital trail whether they want to or not, through emails, text messages, social media, instant messages, etc. Even if the author deletes such data, it does not necessarily mean that they completely disappear. Often times, they can be accessed with the right tools.

If you are technically savvy, you may try to retrieve the information yourself; however, this carries risks. First of all, you may damage the data or hardware. Second, you may expose your snooping behavior, tipping off your partner to be more cautious in the future. Third, if the information you find prompts you decide to file for divorce, the court may deem that your method of gathering has contaminated the evidence and it may not be legally. It is always safer to hire a third party to retrieve the evidence. Additionally, the data may just be hidden too well for a non-professional to discover something truly revealing.

Possible precautions and ways of hiding incriminating evidence

There are many techniques that a cheating spouse may use to hide his or her affair. They will probably use a passcode that is likely complex if the affair is carried over the phone. They may also have their passcode “Erase Data” feature enabled, which would erase their iPhone data if the wrong passcode is entered 10 times in a row. They can use third party applications for SMS / text messages so that the texts will not show up on the phone bill or in detail online. Even for phone calls, third party dialers like Skype or Google voice may be used so that the calls will stay unaccounted for. They can turn off the auto-preview for text messages to prevent the content of their messages or inappropriate pictures from showing up on top of their passcode screen. Also, most “smart” cheaters will clear all browsing history related to their lover, including bookmarks to webmail pages, their text / SMS history with their lover, their Internet history and cache for web sites that they visited for their lover, their call history for calls made to and from their lover and any calls made to the incriminating hotels, restaurants, travel agents, yacht rentals, etc. Moreover, they may go as far as to create fake work-related or other non-suspicious appointments or meetings in their digital calendar to give them an alibi to meet their lover. They can also use apps like “Fake Caller” to simulate an incoming call from their boss or co-worker for an excuse to rendezvous at their lover’s location. Finally, they will likely save their lover’s contact information under a different name or gender amongst their contacts.

Very similar methods are used to hide incriminating information on a laptop or a personal computer, which are aimed at preventing you from reaching the information. Such situations are when digital forensics may prove to be truly invaluable.

Digital forensics in infidelity cases

What can digital forensics experts do to help you find the truth? Mobile forensics technicians can recover deleted text messages, retrieve erased emails and web history, recover GPS locations, and look at phone call logs. Texts, emails, web history, and encrypted and hidden documents can all be recovered using computer forensics. Even if the cheating partner made sure to take all the necessary precautions and was smart enough to delete all of the incriminating evidence in a timely manner, it is possible to get access to this information with the help of a professional.

The process of recovering information is rather complicated and very precise. It is important to follow a legally correct forensic process when obtaining evidence of any illicit activity. To gather forensic evidence, you need a licensed specialist with knowledge of hardware architecture, software systems, and the legal process. The right forensic evidence gathered in the wrong way can ruin your chance of presenting the forensic evidence in court. As electronic data can be a crucial factor in any digital forensic case, proper procedure is essential.

Forensic specialists not only retrieve hidden or encrypted data, but also document every point of electronic discovery in the process. This information is then compiled into a clearly written digital forensic report explaining what the data reveals. If you choose to take legal action, investigators can testify in court with this forensically sound data as accredited investigators.

Even if you do not choose to file for divorce, you certainly want to know the whole truth to be able to move on with your relationship. What often happens is that people accidentally find partial evidence like one or two messages, a photo of the lover, a fake location, etc. and confront their partner right away. However, most of the time, the adulterer will deny his or her other relationship and will find a way to explain the evidence, making it seem innocent. At best he or she will make a partial confession without disclosing the entire story out of fear of facing the consequences. However, you do not want to have any lingering questions after your spouse's affair is over. Therefore, however emotional you might feel at the moment of initial discovery, you are best advised to recover more proof of the infidelity. Therefore, you can be completely positive that your partner is having an affair before making a hasty decision, and whether it is a physical or online infidelity, you should present the evidence to them bit by bit so that they will get tangled in their own lies and will have to confess the whole truth.

The case of Martha, who used the help of McCann E-Investigations, is a representative one.

After she accidentally found her husband's phone unlocked for a few seconds and saw a very personal message from who she guessed to be his lover, she decided not to tell him anything and to look for more details just to be sure. However, when she tried to log onto his email and Facebook accounts, she realized that they were password-protected and that the passwords were not stored in the cache of their home computer. She found this fact alarming because, in the past, her husband did not seem to keep information private from his wife. When Martha realized that she could not access any information herself, she contacted McCann E-Investigations and had the forensic experts examined her family's home computer. By the time the computer forensic experts completed the imaging, culling and analysis steps, she had obtained irrefutable evidence of her husband's affair with another woman, which started as a virtual friendship and over two years evolved into an emotionally complex long-distant one with periodic meetings during his business trips to her part of the country. Having obtained the full report from McCann, Martha talked to her husband, and he had no option but to confess. He ended his affair and they managed to overcome the situation and to preserve their marriage, which included two beautiful children. Martha later said that knowing the truth gave her the strength to confront her husband and to insist on some vital changes in their relationship.

Live monitoring of cell phones and computers

Sometimes digital forensics alone cannot recover enough evidence, and there is a need for a live monitoring of your partner's phone, computer, or of both devices. New tools can be installed that allow for viewing and documenting mobile activity, including viewing live text, email and web searches. There may be difficulties in obtaining screen details for third-party platforms like Facebook, etc. However, computer-monitoring tools allow for a more complete monitoring of laptops and desktops with much better keystroke tracking and screen shots to get more detail on activities on third-party platforms such as Facebook, Skype, etc.

Any individual can easily purchase many of these tools online in the matter of minutes, so you may be tempted to use them on your own. After all, it is absolutely legal to buy spyware. However, installing it and using it may get you into serious legal trouble unless you strictly follow all of the guidelines, which vary state by state. Violating those regulations such as the Wiretap Act during an investigation could result in being charged with a federal felony, which is punishable by fine and/or imprisonment! However, if you decide to independently monitor your spouse anyway, be sure to obtain professional legal advice and look at state laws regarding wiretapping.

Advantages of an all-in-one service

Alternatively, if you decide to hire a forensic investigations agency like McCann Investigations, you will have the combined advantage of obtaining a whole range of services – from forensic examination to live monitoring to traditional surveillance and undercover investigation – which are all performed in complete accordance with state and national laws. Then, if you decide to start litigation against your spouse, your expert investigator can serve as a huge asset to your case in court. Expert witnesses who have testified at hundreds of trials have the necessary poise and expertise to handle intense cross-examinations and scrutiny from the bench. Companies like McCann Investigations also prepare you to ask the right questions, and their experts will deliver the answers that you need to win your case.