

Virtual Reality, Actual

Her story followed a familiar pattern. She had reconnected with an old flame on a social networking site.

“We started e-mailing each other once a week,” my friend said to me. “Then twice, then every day. Now I find myself obsessed with what I am going to write to him. I reread things he writes to me. I know what you are probably going to say, but I don’t want to give up his friendship. It is what I live for right now.”

Then came her questions. “Do you think I have a problem? Do you think I should tell my husband? What do you think I should do?”

After asking a few questions, I found that her experience was nearly identical to what mine had been. She was caught up in the excitement of a new relationship, and she spent the majority of her free time developing it. She hid her new friendship from her husband. The emotional energy that she was putting into the new relationship should have been invested in her marriage. What at first seemed an innocent renewal of an old acquaintance had crossed dangerous boundaries, and she was unaware (or refused to see) that she was involved in an emotional relationship that could easily turn into a physical affair. It was something I had let happen to me, and I feared she was on the same path.

Based on my own experience, I have identified seven early warning signs that you are involved in an inappropriate online relationship.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVE STOKER



A woman with blonde hair is sitting on a brown couch, looking down at a laptop computer. She is wearing a blue short-sleeved shirt. The background is a textured, brown wall.

Risks

*Seven ways to guard against
inappropriate online relationships.*

Couples, you may find great benefit to reading this article together with your spouse.



BE FAITHFUL

“Be faithful in your marriage covenants in thought, word, and deed. Pornography, flirtations, and unwholesome fantasies erode one’s character and strike at the foundation of a happy

marriage. Unity and trust within a marriage are thereby destroyed. One who does not control his thoughts and thus commits adultery in his heart, if he does not repent, shall not have the Spirit, but shall deny the faith and shall fear (see D&C 42:23; 63:16).”

President Howard W. Hunter (1907–1995), “Being a Righteous Husband and Father,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1994, 50.

1. You are withdrawing from your spouse.

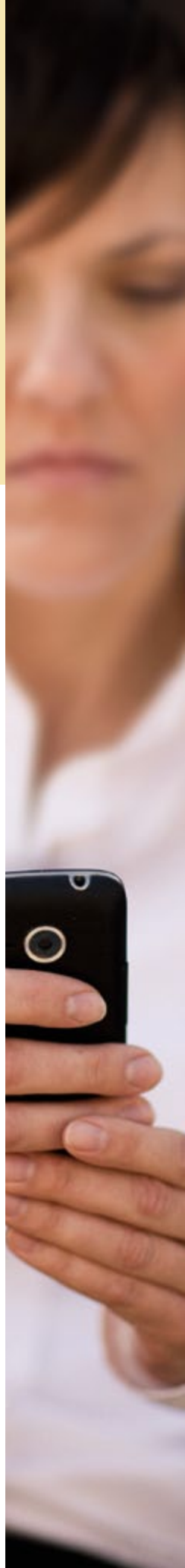
Maintaining a healthy marriage takes effort, and I’ve learned that when either spouse stops taking care of the marriage, it is in danger. In my situation, my husband and I had created a marriage where we were dependent on each other to feel good about ourselves. When raising children and dealing with financial insecurity put pressure on our marriage, it stopped feeling good, and we invested less in each other. When we talked, it was mainly about daily logistics—not our feelings, thoughts, or interests. There was little money for dating.

President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) taught: “Why all of these broken homes? What happens to marriages that begin with sincere love and a desire to be loyal and faithful and true one to another? . . . I find selfishness to be the root cause of most of it.”¹

He also taught that marriage “is a union between a man and a woman under the plan of the Almighty. It can be fragile. It requires nurture and very much effort.”²

2. You are hiding communications with your friend from your spouse.

If you feel you need to keep the relationship a secret, it’s inappropriate. I convinced myself that my husband wouldn’t be concerned about my communications with another man, but still I didn’t tell him. Elder



Marvin J. Ashton (1915–1994) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles warned: “No [person] will ever be totally free who is living a lie. . . . We should ever bear in mind that a wrong isn’t right just because many people do it. A wrong deed isn’t right just because it hasn’t become visible.”³

3. You are preoccupied with and day-dream about your friend.

Even if you don’t have a physical relationship with your online friend, your thoughts can reveal that the relationship is inappropriate. I asked my friend how much time she spends online writing to the other person. Then I asked her how much time she spends *thinking* about what she is going to write to the other person. The way we spend our mental energy is an indicator of our true focus. Although we may be able to keep our inappropriate thoughts hidden from the people around us, Heavenly Father “knoweth the secrets of the heart” (Psalm 44:21).

4. You are sharing your thoughts, feelings, and problems with your online friend instead of your spouse.

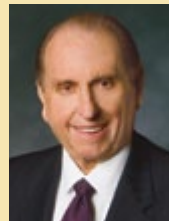
Such emotional relationships damage marriages. After some years of not communicating effectively, my husband and I grew apathetic about changing our patterns. Sharing my thoughts, feelings, and ideas with a different person simply seemed easier. This was a grave mistake. President Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) counseled, “If you are married, avoid flirtations of any kind. . . . What may appear to be

harmless teasing or simply having a little fun with someone of the opposite sex can easily lead to more serious involvement and eventual infidelity. A good question to ask ourselves is this: Would my spouse be pleased if he or she knew I was doing this? Would a wife be pleased to know that her husband lunches alone with his secretary? Would a husband be pleased if he saw his wife flirting and being coy with another man? My beloved brothers and sisters, this is what Paul meant when he said: ‘Abstain from all appearance of evil’ (1 Thessalonians 5:22).”⁴

5. Your online friend seems to understand you better than your spouse does. You find yourself anticipating when you can communicate or be with your online friend again.

I know of people who organize their day around the time they will communicate with their new online friend. For some, they have become so dependent on the way they feel and represent themselves online that it has become the highlight of their day.

I’ve learned that as exciting and promising as a new relationship may seem, its true destructive nature is inevitably revealed in time. President Benson described this situation: “There may be momentary pleasure. For a time it may seem like everything is wonderful. But quickly the relationship will sour. Guilt and shame set in. We become fearful that our sins will be discovered. We must sneak and hide, lie and cheat. Love begins to die. Bitterness, jealousy, anger, and even hate begin to grow. All of these are the natural results of sin and transgression.”⁵



THINGS AS THEY REALLY ARE

“Almost everywhere we turn, there are those who would have us believe that what was once considered immoral is now acceptable. I think of the scripture, ‘Wo unto them that call evil good, and good evil, that put darkness for light, and light for darkness’ (2 Nephi 15:20; see also Isaiah 5:20). . . . We are reminded in the Book of Mormon that chastity and virtue are precious above all things.”

President Thomas S. Monson, “True to the Faith,” *Liahona and Ensign*, May 2006, 18.

6. You are not interested in being close to your spouse, emotionally or physically.

Emotional closeness is as important to a marriage as physical intimacy. When a person loses interest in being close to a spouse—emotionally or physically—that person may make the mistake of looking elsewhere for that closeness. President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) taught, “The tender flower would wither and die without food and water. And so love, also, cannot be expected to last forever unless it is continually fed with portions of love, the manifestation of esteem and admiration, the expressions of gratitude, and the consideration of unselfishness.”⁶

7. When confronted about having feelings toward someone other than your spouse, you justify your actions to yourself and others.

Husbands and wives do have positive relationships with members of the opposite sex. Friendships are important at all stages of life. However, this fact is often used to rationalize inappropriate behavior. Remember the pattern outlined by Elder ElRay L. Christiansen (1897–1975), Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve: “Now, the adversary knows that a little sin will not stay little, and he welcomes any and all into his kingdom by first trying to get us to lie a little, then helping us to try to justify ourselves in so

doing or to cheat or to steal. . . . He knows full well that, if continued, such diversions soon result in regrets, sorrows, and losses, because they lead us into greater sinfulness.”⁷

I don’t know any Latter-day Saint who intends to turn a friendship into an extramarital affair. I know *I* never imagined such devastation. But emotional affairs *are* affairs, and they damage relationships, even when they don’t involve sexual infidelity.⁸ In a revelation given to the elders of the Church in 1831, the Lord commanded, “Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart” (D&C 42:22). President Benson said: “What does it mean to love someone with all your heart? It means to love with all your emotional feelings and with all your devotion.”⁹ Emotional attachment to someone who is not our spouse makes it impossible to love our spouse as the Lord commanded. The resulting heartache and feelings of betrayal are difficult to imagine when such relationships begin, but they can be devastating.

Ending an Improper Relationship

My advice to my friend was simple: end it. End the online friendship, no matter how awkward or difficult. Tell your spouse. Counsel with your bishop. Develop a pattern of happiness that is not dependent on others. Recognize that secret actions have consequences, and those who develop online friendships will most likely come to experience regret, pain, confusion, and shame. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said, “If an improper relationship is developing, sever it. Many of these influences, at least initially, may not technically be evil, but they can blunt



FOR MORE ON THIS TOPIC:

Kenneth W. Matheson, “Fidelity in Marriage: It’s More Than You Think,” *Ensign*, Sept. 2009, 12–16.

“What Prophets and Apostles Teach about Chastity and Fidelity,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1998, 38–41.

Terrance D. Olson, “Truths of Moral Purity,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1998, 42–49.



REMEMBERING CHRIST

“Most people in trouble end up crying, ‘What was I thinking?’ Well, whatever they were thinking, they weren’t thinking of Christ.

. . . Surely it would guide our actions in a dramatic way if we remembered that every time we transgress, we hurt not only those we love, but we also hurt Him, who so dearly loves us. But if we do sin, however serious that sin may be, we can be rescued by that same majestic figure, He who bears the only name given under heaven whereby *any* man or woman can be saved (see Acts 4:12). When confronting our transgressions and our souls are harrowed up with true pain, may we all echo the repentant Alma and utter his life-changing cry: ‘O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me’ (Alma 36:18).”

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Place No More for the Enemy of My Soul,” *Liahona* and *Ensign*, May 2010, 46.

our judgment, dull our spirituality, and lead to something that could be evil.”¹⁰

My sin was never worth the pain it caused me, my spouse, and the rest of our family. I hope that others who find themselves in dangerous online situations can have a similar change of heart—the kind that is possible only through the Lord Jesus Christ. ■

NOTES

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “What God Hath Joined Together,” *Ensign*, May 1991, 73.
2. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Walking in the Light of the Lord,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1998, 99.
3. Marvin J. Ashton, “This Is No Harm,” *Ensign*, May 1982, 11.
4. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Law of Chastity,” in *1987–88 Brigham Young University Devotional Addresses* (1988), 52.
5. Ezra Taft Benson, “Chastity,” 51.
6. Spencer W. Kimball, “Marriage and Divorce,” *1976 Devotional Speeches of the Year* (1977), 150.
7. ElRay L. Christiansen, “Power Over Satan,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1974, 24.
8. Ronald T. Potter-Efron and Patricia S. Potter-Efron, *The Emotional Affair: How to Recognize Emotional Infidelity and What to Do about It* (2008), 15.
9. Ezra Taft Benson, “To the Fathers in Israel,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1987, 50.
10. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Place No More for the Enemy of My Soul,” *Ensign*, May 2010, 45.