



How can we protect our marriages against the growing evil of technology-assisted emotional infidelity?

MARRIAGE, TECHNOLOGY, AND EMOTIONAL INFIDELITY

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The institution of marriage has come under a great deal of scrutiny. Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles warned us more than a decade ago that “the adversary’s attacks upon eternal marriage will continue to increase in intensity, frequency, and sophistication.”¹ One area of concern involves modern technology, which has opened new avenues for engaging in what is termed “emotional infidelity.”

Heavenly Father’s teachings on the sanctity of marriage, however, remain clear. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” tells us that “children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity.”²

The scriptures declare, “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14; see also Mosiah 13:22; D&C 59:6), and “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife [or husband]” (Exodus 20:17; see also Mosiah 13:24). Story after story—from David and Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11) to Akish and the daughter of Jared (see Ether 8:8–17)—warn us of the destructive results of lust and infidelity.

So when God’s teachings on the sanctity of marriage are so clear, why do some put their marriage at risk for the fleeting excitement of emotional infidelity?



In a healthy marriage, protecting our hearts or emotions is just as important as protecting our bodies.

spouse's emotional involvement with someone outside the marriage than about the physical betrayal that often follows. In the words of one client, "I believe that my wife loves me, but I also believe that a sliver of her heart belongs to him, and I can't live with that."

Over three decades ago, Latter-day Saint marriage and family therapist Carlfred Broderick gave a talk addressing infidelity titled "It Came Out of the Blue, like a Scheduled Airline." He chose the title because couples he worked with often expressed surprise at their predicament and said that the infidelity had "come out of the blue"; however, Dr. Broderick pointed out that infidelity is the result of previous smaller decisions in marriage. These choices place a couple on a course for betrayal as predictable as a scheduled airliner.³ Dr. Broderick's ideas are more relevant today than ever.

Redefining Infidelity

Texting, email, games, chat rooms, and social media offer an array of new ways for individuals to connect outside of marriage, and the result is an enormous increase in technology-assisted infidelity. As a marriage therapist, I have seen emotional infidelity develop through all of these channels.

One client said to me, "I feel like I'm in a nightmare. I mean, this is not who I am." Her husband had discovered a series of texts on her cell phone between her and another man in their ward. The texts ranged from flirtation to wholehearted emotional sharing, and her husband was deeply wounded.

The absence of physical contact had made it easier for my client to justify her ongoing emotional interaction, unaware that the generated connection would become so powerful. In some ways, these types of emotional connections are more harmful than physical connections. Betrayed partners often report more distress about a

Losing Spiritual Integrity

Online and texting activities are easy to hide. In the absence of face-to-face communication, people tend to be more open about sharing intimate feelings. This creates intense emotional connections. Some feel like they can have the novelty of infidelity online with one person while enjoying the stability of marriage in real life with another. This plan does not work. Infidelity in any of its forms compromises marriages spiritually, structurally, and sometimes irreparably. Putting one's committed marriage at risk by being involved in emotional infidelity is akin to selling one's birthright for a mess of pottage (see Genesis 25).

Viewing instances of technology-assisted emotional infidelity has helped me better understand the importance of the Savior's admonition that "whosoever looketh on a woman [or man], to lust after her [or him], hath committed adultery already in his [or her] heart. . . . I give unto you a commandment, that ye suffer none of these things to enter into your heart" (3 Nephi 12:28–29).

A healthy marriage offers a secure bond and a capacity for quality and depth with which emotional infidelity—when looked at honestly—cannot ultimately compete. However, the secrecy surrounding emotional infidelity through the use of cell phones or computers can seem exciting. In contrast to this fantasy, the practical tasks of marriage—such as bill paying, childcare, and chores—may make marriage seem mundane, clouding judgment. In a technology-based relationship, people can easily control their presentations to the other person. Such relationships are fraught with deception. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has said that Satan “will do anything he can to counterfeit true

love, to profane and desecrate true love wherever and whenever he encounters it.”⁴

Committing to Loyalty

President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) said, “One might expect that every marriage in the house of the Lord would carry with it a covenant of loyalty one to another.”⁵ Renowned marital researcher John Gottman pointed out that “a committed relationship is a contract of mutual trust, respect, nurturance, and protection. *Anything* that violates that contract can become traitorous.” He identified two common aspects that diminish trust in marriage: “Deception (not revealing your true needs to avoid unpleasant conflict) and a yearning for emotional connection that seems unavailable from the partner.”⁶ The real danger comes when the avoidance of conflict becomes deep-seated resentment.

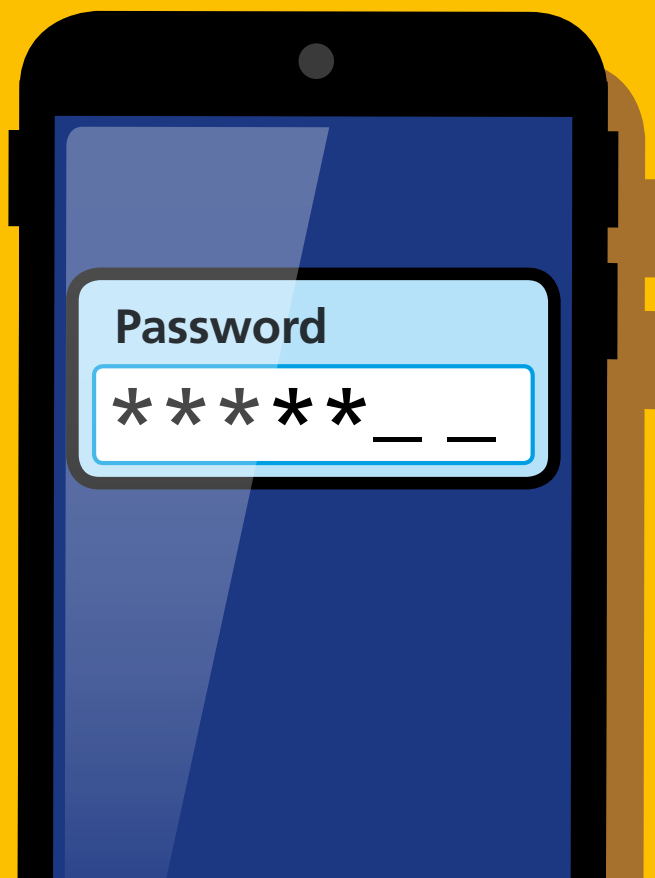
I once asked a man who had been engaging in online infidelity via texting if he knew what he was getting from that relationship that he wasn’t getting in his marriage. He explained that he got acceptance and admiration he didn’t feel at home. I asked him if he ever talked to his wife about it. He replied, “I don’t think I want to risk that kind of rejection. She hasn’t liked me for a long time.” He had decided to “not need anything” from his marriage, leaving it open to attack. In a healthy marriage, both partners are loyal to each other and take turns sharing needs and responding to each other in meaningful ways. Attending early to difficulties within the marriage helps prevent infidelity.

Protecting Your Marriage

Knowing what signs to watch for and how to apply gospel principles can help prevent emotional infidelity and build stronger marriages.

1. *Realize that you are not immune to the possibility of infidelity.* In his Brigham Young University marriage classes, Brent Barlow told a story about a ditch in front of his family’s home. Being aware of the risks the ditch posed, he and his wife frequently counseled their children to be cautious. He pointed out that his children were likely safer from that

A boundary has been crossed when one person begins hiding interactions from a spouse.



potential peril than people living farther away because his children's awareness of the danger kept them vigilant.⁷

Researcher Shirley Glass has pointed out that those who become involved in infidelity frequently love their spouses and believe that infidelity is wrong. However, love and convictions don't always make us immune to the temptation to develop inappropriate attachments under certain circumstances.⁸ We must always remain vigilant in our marriages.

2. *Actively monitor communication boundaries within and around the sacred marital relationship.* In this Internet age it is vital that we build strong boundaries to protect our marriages. In Alma 49 we read how Captain Moroni led the Nephites to build a fortress around the city Ammonihah "in a manner which never had been known among the children of Lehi" (verse 8). The Lamanites had conquered that city before and assumed it would be "easy prey" (verse 3), but they were wrong and "astonished exceedingly" (verse 5). They failed in their attempt to take the city.

Dr. Glass uses the imagery of walls and windows to illustrate communication boundaries in marriage.⁹ In a solid marriage, open sharing between partners is represented by a window, while walls are erected around the relationship, protecting it from intrusive forces from the outside. When emotional infidelity occurs, one partner has put up a wall, limiting communication with the marital partner, and opened a window to an outside partner by sharing personal information. Spouses should *never* discuss marital problems with another person where there is any potential for infidelity.

Be especially careful in your online contact with former love interests, since previous familiarity potentially ignites high levels of emotion, says Dr. Glass.¹⁰ People are often unprepared for the emotion elicited from these encounters and can misinterpret the feelings to mean that the old bond is somehow more legitimate than the marriage relationship. This comparison is inaccurate and fraudulent. While brain chemicals produced in these situations are real and drug-like, they are also fleeting and unsustainable.



Ask yourself, "Would I be comfortable if my spouse were watching over my shoulder?"

3. *Remain transparent with your spouse.* Infidelity includes deception. A boundary has been crossed when one person begins hiding interactions from a spouse. One deception can entirely shift a relationship. A wife locked her phone and changed the password so that her husband couldn't see her text messages. He found out later that this was the point at which she and the man she was involved with online had started disclosing their feelings for each other. Additionally, when she locked her phone, she began planning to meet up with the other man, which eventually led to physical infidelity.

4. *Watch carefully and correct often.* King Benjamin's words apply here: "If ye do not watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, . . . ye must perish" (Mosiah 4:30).

As President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, said:

"The difference between happiness and misery in individuals, in marriages, and families often comes down to an error of only a few degrees. . . .

“Small errors and minor drifts away from the doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ can bring sorrowful consequences into our lives. It is therefore of critical importance that we become self-disciplined enough to make early and decisive corrections to get back on the right track and not wait or hope that errors will somehow correct themselves.”¹¹

Healing through the Atonement of Jesus Christ

When a spouse has made a mistake but has repented, the couple can rebuild their relationship through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. However, too many people with truly repentant spouses fail to believe that healing is possible after a violation of trust. Rebuilding trust is scary and difficult, but it is possible, and people can restore strong marriages from the wreckage. As couples allow themselves time to heal and continue to work at communication about the tragic events, and as they make restitution by being different in action, validating each other and apologizing, healing starts to emerge. Forgiveness can be a slow process, but it is attainable. As Elder Walter F. González of the Seventy said, “The power of our covenants is greater than any challenge we face or we may face.”¹²

The most gratifying experiences I encounter as a couples therapist are those in which betrayal has threatened the foundation of a marriage but the partners heal from the tragedy and create more strength and closeness than they had before. They realize the importance of recommitting and healing, and they put forth the effort to make it happen. They listen to each other more carefully. They humbly evaluate what they can do differently to prevent such incidents from happening again. They exercise kindness and patience. They appreciate each other more than before. Most important, they exercise faith and find ways to obtain healing through Jesus Christ and His Atonement, both individually and as a couple. I cannot overemphasize that healing is possible. I have seen many marriages heal after betrayal.

I remember one instance in which a husband whose wife had been involved in online infidelity came in not only understandably hurt but also uncharitable and condemning

toward his wife. As we processed the situation in therapy, he realized that he had been emotionally unavailable to her. He began to soften over time. Not only did he become more forgiving of her, but he asked for forgiveness from her. She became genuinely apologetic and connected to him and gave up her online infidelity completely. She realized she really did want to be with her husband, who had become more responsive and kind to her.

When healing occurs, it is usually because *both* spouses increase their spiritual sensitivity and responsiveness to each other and *both* take responsibility for their own contributions to difficulties in the marriage.

Heavenly Father sees and understands our day, with its unique challenges. He knew technology would become a risk as well as a blessing, and He provided a plan for us to follow to return to Him. Strengthening our testimonies of the all-encompassing nature of the Atonement of Jesus Christ helps us access motivation to connect with spouses and strengthen marriages. President James E. Faust (1920–2007), Second Counselor in the First Presidency, pointed out that “marriages performed in our temples, meant to be eternal relationships, . . . become the most sacred covenants we can make.”¹³ As we work to fortify and repair our marriages through repentance, we honor our sacred marital covenants. God will help us. ■

NOTES

1. David A. Bednar, “Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan,” *Ensign*, June 2006, 85.
2. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
3. See Carlfred B. Broderick, “It Came Out of the Blue, like a Scheduled Airline: Guarding against Adultery and Weathering Tribulation” (audio recording, 1983).
4. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Place No More for the Enemy of My Soul,” *Ensign*, May 2010, 46.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Loyalty,” *Ensign*, May 2003, 59.
6. See John Gottman and Nan Silver, *What Makes Love Last? How to Build Trust and Avoid Betrayal* (2012), 66.
7. See Brent Barlow, “When Speaking of Marriage, Consider Temples and Ditches” (Meaningful Marriage series), brentabarlow.blogspot.com; first printed in *Deseret News*, Jan. 19, 1984.
8. See Shirley P. Glass, *Not “Just Friends”: Rebuilding Trust and Recovering Your Sanity after Infidelity* (2003), 21–22.
9. See Glass, *Not “Just Friends,”* 25.
10. See Glass, *Not “Just Friends,”* 34.
11. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “A Matter of a Few Degrees,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 58, 59.
12. Walter F. González, “Followers of Christ,” *Ensign*, May 2011, 14.
13. James E. Faust, “Father, Come Home,” *Ensign*, May 1993, 36.