

Would you stay with your husband/wife/partner if this happened to you?

“CYBER-CHEATS BEWARE”

Soon after getting the computer, Jennifer's husband, Simon, (not their real names) started using the Internet nightly. At first, she didn't worry. But soon he was spending more and more time in the home office, sitting at his computer long into the night. He stopped coming to bed with her and sometimes would even sleep on the office sofa. A few times she even caught him sneaking silently out of their bed in the middle of the night to go to the office computer.

At first she thought he was simply addicted to the Internet or even browsing through on-line pornography. But when Simon started turning down sex, Jennifer got suspicious.

"He'd never not wanted to have sex before," says Jennifer. "That was a new thing. And I didn't think it was because he was up all night visiting news sites. I knew something was wrong."

With suspicions on full alert she started going through Simon's drawers and trouser pockets. She found nothing. Then she went to the computer, looked through his files and found the answer: Simon was having an e-mail affair with a woman in another part of the country.

"I was devastated," she admits. "I never imagined my husband would ever cheat on me."

But is 'cyber-cheating' still cheating?

"Yes, definitely," says one marriage guidance counselor. "From a psychological point of view, it doesn't matter if it was real or imagined - in both cases the marriage has been damaged in the same way."

Not all professionals in the field of family psychology agree. "It's ridiculous and dangerous to try and monitor the thoughts and fantasies of your partner," warns one psychologist. "We are bombarded with images of attractive people by the media on a daily basis. It's impossible not to fantasize. The Internet is a place for people to carry out those fantasies in a safe and unarmful way. If, as a result, there is a crisis in the marriage following an episode of Internet infidelity, then it is only a symptom of something that was already wrong in the relationship, and not necessarily a direct result of the cyber affair."

This is, of course, of no comfort to Jennifer, who is filing for divorce. "I actually saw the intimate things he wrote to her. He really hurt me and I know that I will never be able to trust him again."