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THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET ON RELATIONSHIPS

As a relationship counsellor I will give some examples of both the positive and negative effects that the internet has on relationships.

Internet infidelity

This is different from traditional infidelities in that it appears to be anonymous and relatively safe, as it can be pursued in the privacy of one's home or office. One's identity can be completely obscured or misrepresented. Signs that a person is engaging in Internet infidelity, is going on to the computer when everyone else is in bed, an escalation of the time spent on the computer, demand for privacy and lack of interest in the partner's and children's lives. It can offer the fantasy of excitement, romance and passion that may be missing from the current relationship.

There are some differences to what researchers describe as cyber flirting, cyber sex and cyber affairs. Cyber flirting is a surfer who logs on to the internet to chat with cyber friends. The difficulty for their current relationship is when the surfer begins telling the cyber friends of their relationship difficulties, this can sometimes lead into an accidental infidelity happening by chance with no real consideration of the consequences. The danger is that relationship becomes intense far more rapidly, and can then cross the line from flirting to overt sexual interaction.

Cyber sex is when the surfer goes on the internet with the explicit intention of achieving sexual satisfaction.

Cyber affairs are when one partner shares an emotional connection with a cyber friend they have met on the internet, the cyber couple will become deeply involved. This may or may not involve cyber sex. The impact on the couple when the cyber affair is discovered is feelings of betrayal, anger, lack of trust, but the difficulty in this is that often the person involved in the affair does not share the same view of the reality of the relationship, particularly if they have never met their on line partner. When working with a couple in counselling it is important to enable the partner who has had the affair to recognise that their partner's feelings are valid.

Internet Dating Sites

The most obvious negative impact is people do not have to be honest in how they portray themselves. They can lie about their status describing themselves as single when they are married. The other negative impact is how easy it is to access a large number of potential partners. The danger is the expectation that you will reveal many personal and private details about yourself leaving you vulnerable to others knowing more about you than you would normally reveal in the early stages of a relationship.

The positive sides are for those that are separated or divorced who know few people outside their social circle they shared with their partner it is a useful forum for expanding their possibilities for meeting new people.

For those seeking partners it is a means of finding people who share their particular interests. It is also a place where the gay population find a means of meeting partners. Many describe the gay bars as a scene that does not meet their needs.

One area the internet is particularly destructive to relationships is in the development of addictions. Once an addiction takes its grip it is very difficult for the addict to recognise they have a problem, the relationship inevitably will suffer as the primary relationship for the addict is their addiction.

The Internet can have a detrimental effect on peoples' relationships, which has been made more difficult with the arrival of Facebook, Twitter, the I phone, and smart/android phone. When they are constantly checking their phone or their Facebook page and Twitter in your presence, you begin to wonder whether they are interested in talking to you at all.

I have done marriage preparation courses with couples who have met through the internet and was impressed at how likeminded they were in sharing of values and expectations for their future together.

It is like all good advice used in the right way for the right purpose, the internet can enrich peoples lives.

If there is a problem in the relationship rather than seek an escape through the internet, talk to your partner, get counselling if necessary, the internet is not the solution and in many cases will only add to the problem.

Claire Missen

(This is an extract from a talk given to Rathfarnham Parish during the Lenten lecture series).