



**national  
healthy marriage  
resource center**

# Frequently Asked Questions

**Infidelity**

# Infidelity

This FAQ answers some common questions about infidelity using findings from scientifically sound research.

Research doesn't have all the answers, but it can shed a great deal of light on many questions.

## Questions:

Q1. *What percentage of married individuals “cheat” on their spouse?*

Q2. *What are some of the factors that increase the chances of having an affair while married?*

Q3. *What impact does infidelity have on marriages and individuals?*

Q4. *How does one recover after the discovery of infidelity in a marriage?*

Q5. *Is sexual infidelity the only way of being unfaithful to your spouse?*

Q6. *How is Internet infidelity defined and how is it similar and different from traditional infidelity?*

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## Q1. What percentage of married individuals “cheat” on their spouse?

### A1.

- Researchers struggle to come up with valid answers to this question, but some recent solid research may be getting close to a good answer. One study found that about 4 percent of married men and 2 percent of married women admitted to infidelity within the previous year. <sup>1</sup>
- Over the whole length of a marriage, however, studies have found that about 25 percent of men and 10-15 percent of women report having had sex with someone other than their spouse. <sup>2</sup>
- These estimates of infidelity may underestimate somewhat the number of people who are unfaithful to their spouse because some people will not admit to infidelity in a survey, even when their answers are anonymous.

## Q2. What are some of the factors that increase the chances of having an affair while married?

### A2.

A range of factors may contribute to increased chances of infidelity:

- *Marital Dissatisfaction*: Those who say their relationships are “not too happy” are four times more likely to engage in infidelity than those who say they are “very happy.” However, research suggests that regardless of how unhappy people were with their marriages, it was only after they began thinking and talking about divorce that they (or their spouse) began searching for new sexual partners. <sup>3</sup>
- *Divorce*: Compared to those who have never divorced, men and women who have had a divorce in the past are twice as likely to be unfaithful. <sup>4</sup>
- *Young Age at Marriage*: Individuals who married at a young age are more likely to be unfaithful. In fact, individuals who were married at 16 years of age were almost four times more likely to be unfaithful than those who were married at 23 years of age or older. <sup>5</sup>
- *Employment*: Individuals who work outside the home have a greater risk of infidelity. <sup>6</sup>
- *Income*: Individuals earning \$75,000 or more per year are more than 1.5 times more likely to have had an affair as those earning less than \$30,000 per year. <sup>7</sup>
- *Education*: People at the ends of the education spectrum—eighth grade or less, and master’s degree or higher—are more likely to be unfaithful. <sup>8</sup>
- *Lack of Religious Beliefs*: Those who never attend religious services are 2.5 times more likely to have been unfaithful than those who attend religious services more than once a week. <sup>9</sup>

## Q3. What impact does infidelity have on marriages and individuals?

### A3.

- Some studies show that infidelity is the number one cause of divorce and separation; other studies show that it is one of the leading causes of divorce. One study suggests that the impact of infidelity on divorce is more than twice as large as any other relationship problem. <sup>10</sup>
- One study found that infidelity was the most frequent cause of wife beating and killing. <sup>11</sup>

- The discovery of infidelity often results in personal reactions resembling posttraumatic stress symptoms seen in the victims of catastrophic events. <sup>12</sup>
- Married women who experience stress that involves humiliation or devaluation, including a husband's infidelity, are six times more likely to be diagnosed with major depression than women who do not experience this kind of stress. <sup>13</sup>

#### **Q4. How does one recover after the discovery of infidelity in a marriage?**

##### **A4.**

- Studies suggest that after the disclosure of unfaithfulness, couples traditionally go through three stages: roller coaster, moratorium, and building trust. The roller coaster phase is reacting to the affair with intense emotions such as denial, fierce anger, or depression. The moratorium stage involves less intense emotions and efforts to make some kind of meaning out of the infidelity. People in this phase also often retreat physically and emotionally, and they recruit support from others in their efforts to understand the infidelity. In the third phase, people try to build trust again by reengaging with the spouse, stating a commitment to the relationship, increasing communication, and forgiving the spouse. <sup>14</sup>
- Another study suggests three steps as part of the healing process after the discovery of an affair. First, both spouses need to accept that their feelings are normal; second, they must decide whether they want to recommit to their relationship or terminate it; and third, if they decide to recommit, they must undertake the process of rebuilding the relationship by earning back trust, communicating pain, becoming sexually intimate again, and forgiving the person who had the affair. <sup>15</sup>

#### **Q5. Is sexual infidelity the only way of being unfaithful to your spouse?**

##### **A5.**

- Researchers have identified three primary kinds of affairs: emotional (i.e., being emotionally intimate but not sexually intimate), sexual, and emotional/sexual combined. <sup>16</sup>
- Some research suggests that men are more likely than women to have “sexual-only” affairs, and women are more likely to have “emotional-only” affairs. (More research is needed on this.) <sup>17</sup>

## Q6. How is Internet infidelity defined and how is it similar and different from traditional infidelity?

### A6.

- An Internet, or cyber, affair is a romantic and/or sexual relationship that begins with online contact and is maintained mainly through electronic conversations that occur through e-mail and chat rooms. While many sexual encounters begin online, a large proportion of individuals continue these relationships off-line (in person).<sup>18</sup>
- Cybersex involves two online users engaging in private discourse about sexual fantasies. The dialogue is typically accompanied by sexual self-stimulation.<sup>19</sup>
- Some studies suggest that spouses view on-line acts of infidelity just as real and serious as traditional infidelity.<sup>20</sup>

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