

Anderson Independent-Mail

The Web provides more and more people with a forum for infidelity

Caught in the 'Net

E-mail, chat room romances are growing cause of divorce

By Bartie Lancaster
Independent-Mail

A husband entered private investigator Dan Garrett's office firmly clutching e-mail printouts in his hand. He had discovered an e-mail from his wife making plans to meet a Florida man she had been talking with for several months over the Internet.

The scenario was nothing new for Mr. Garrett. He had another client who was divorcing her husband because he spent all his free time on the Internet. Investigators later found out he was online with his lover.

Internet-sparked adultery is leading more and more married couples astray.

Fifteen percent of Mr. Garrett's domestic cases involve an extramarital affair that began in Internet chat rooms, and that percentage is growing, the Greer investigator said.

Mr. Garrett attributes most of these cases to couples who have been married 15 years or more.

"It's middle-age crazy," he said. "They get bored and complacent. They get a computer. They start playing solitaire and then go to chat rooms. The next thing you know they're meeting someone at the Red Roof Inn."

It is an up and coming thing that has gradually gotten worse, said Bonnie Johnson, a private investigator at Allied Investigative Service in Anderson.

People used to meet in parks. Now they meet on the Internet. "It's just another modality of meeting people," said Dr. Gayle Peterson, a marriage counselor in Berkeley, Calif.

Meeting on the computer offers instant intimacy. A person finds it easier to go to the computer than their husband or wife to discuss things, gradually siphoning off energy from their marriage and sabotaging it, Dr. Petterson said.

The anonymity of the computer adds an element of mystery and intrigue. Like strangers on a train, people reveal their deepest thoughts with little fear of the other person's opinion.

If they become uncomfortable, they can end the relationship by simply logging off, said Dr. Esther Gwinnell, author of "Falling in Love with Strangers," a book about how and why people form romantic relationships online.

People are able to feel close to this Internet lover without having to reveal anything they don't wish to or take any emotional risks.

This relationship can be comparable to a fantasy. Participants can embellish whatever quali-

ties or personality traits they desire. It leaves more to the imagination, more mystery.

"It's such a different situation from everyday life," Dr. Gwinnell said. "You really have the opportunity to be who you want to be."

When they leave the computer, they may take their online courtier with them in their minds. Obsessive behavior can ensue, like checking the computer for messages repeatedly throughout

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Melissa Lewis
Independent-Mail illustration

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private investigator Dan Garrett

Romance online is tempting

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How to spot an online affair

1. Spouse is secretive about Internet use.
2. Unexpected Internet bills.
3. Significant change in sexual relationship.
4. Spouse is using the Internet after partner is asleep.
5. Spouse spends more than three hours a day on the Internet.
6. Spouse becomes uninterested in non-computer relationships.
7. Spouse spends more time on the Internet than planned.
8. Spouse becomes withdrawn from partner.

Source: Dr. Esther Gwinnell, author of "Falling in Love with Strangers," a book about how and why people form romantic relationships online.

Melissa Lewis Independent-Mail

the day, Dr. Gwinnell said.

These relationships set people up for disaster because there are no early warning signs an affair is developing, as there are in face-to-face encounters, Dr. Gwinnell said. There are no visual, oral or tactile cues.

It's so sneaky people don't even realize what is happening, she said. Before they know it, they have fallen in love with this Internet correspondent.

As more and more people communicate with each other on the Internet the odds are these type affairs will happen more often, Dr. Gwinnell said.

And as with ordinary relationships, some people take advantage of online amours, courting several people online at once, she said.

Divorce attorneys also have seen a drastic boost in marriages breaking up as a result of Internet love affairs.

Where there is not a reasonable expectation of privacy, Internet communication records can be used in court, said Sandy Ain, a divorce attorney in Washington, D.C.

With home computer communication, the court does not consider there to be a reasonable expectation of privacy, and computer records are now regularly used in divorce cases, Mr. Ain said.

In the past, lawyers have used phone records to show the number of hours spouses spent on the Internet. But now that most service providers offer a flat rate for unlimited hours, it is harder to prove how long spouses are spending on the computer, said Stacy Phillips, a divorce attorney in Los Angeles.

In 1997 Ms. Phillips used phone records to prove a spouse, who claimed to be a devoted father, in fact was not because he was spending hundreds of hours a month on the computer.

Ms. Phillips said e-mail conversations are regularly used in divorce proceedings. Specifically, the records can be used to prove conspiracy between a spouse and lover.

And computers sometimes betray online romances. Mr. Ain has had cases where children have discovered their parents were cheating by accidentally pulling up their online conversations.

Mr. Garrett's client, who discovered his wife was going to meet her online lover in person for the first time, did not use e-mail records in court. An investigator followed the couple to a hotel in Commerce, Ga., and later testified in court.

"Used to be a husband or wife would say they think their spouse met someone at work, now they think they met on the Internet," Mr. Garrett said.