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Fulfillment at Any Age

# Surviving a Facebook-Cheating Partner

What to do when your partner is unfaithful on Facebook

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Internet infidelity has been around almost as long as the Internet itself. While browsing through the web's many highways and byways, users often find themselves lured onto sites that promise to satisfy their needs—sexual, emotional, or some combination of the two.

The rise of social media took ordinary Internet infidelity and raised it to newer and much more personal levels. Not only can singles find a match on the many growing online dating sites but so can men and women in an ongoing relationship. Facebook provides ways to enter the networks of others through groups, pages, and friendship circles. In addition, Facebook plus Google makes it possible for exes to reconnect with each other even after one or both have moved on to new relationships.

In a first-of-its-kind study on the victims of Facebook infidelity, Jaclyn Cravens of Texas Tech University's Marriage and Family Therapy Program teamed up with colleagues Kaitlin Leckie and Jason Whiting in a 2013 article appropriately entitled: "Facebook Infidelity: When Poking Becomes Problematic." They used what is called a "grounded theory" approach, meaning that they did not conduct an experimental study but instead coded, recoded, and then coded once again responses they recorded from the website Facebookcheating.com. With no previous

studies to go from, this approach allowed the researchers to delve into the material and discover the unifying themes and issues.

One advantage of using the website material as data is that the researchers were learning about real-life experiences from people's actual lives. So many times we see studies on relationships, including those that investigate the delicate issue of betrayal, that are based on the responses of undergraduate psychology students to fabricated scenarios (e.g. "Rate how violated you would feel if your partner cheated on you on Facebook"). Of course, people can be untruthful on the Internet as well as in the psychology lab, but by investigating this relatively large number of examples, the researchers had a better chance of tapping into the truth. The authors also took steps to ensure that their own biases and backgrounds would not distort their ratings. They primarily addressed this problem by sharing their own beliefs about relationships and how these might affect the coding process.

Cravens and her co-authors finally narrowed their analyses to 90 "cheating stories" concerning, specifically, Facebook infidelity (rather than other forms of infidelity). These stories then became the basis for the study's findings.

From these stories, Cravens and her fellow researchers identified these 5 steps in reactions to Facebook cheating from discovery of the partner's infidelity to the decision about whether to stay in or leave the relationship:

1. **Warning signs:** The cheated-upon often can first sense that something is wrong through their own gut feelings or instincts. They also suspect their partner by noticing changes in behavior (such as spending a great deal of time on the computer) or specifically recognizing suspicious behaviors (such as the partner turning off the computer the minute he or she walks in the room). One participant noticed that his wife changed all the passwords on her email account and also started to use a password on her phone while she was at home.
2. **Discovering the infidelity:** Some partners reported that they accidentally found out about the cheating when their spouse forgot to close out the Facebook account or computer. Others took a more active approach and, after noting those warning signs, conducted their own investigations. Taking a page, perhaps, from some of the latest Internet spying scandals, they put their own stealth skills to use, including recording all of the partner's keystrokes on the computer.
3. **Boundary/damage appraisal:** After discovering the infidelity, the next step involves determining whether the relationship's boundaries were in fact crossed and then deciding

on how much damage the cheating spouse inflicted. Perhaps the spouse was only engaging in a bit of harmless flirtation with a high school ex, in which case this wouldn't necessarily require any action. More serious infringements would involve a longer-term and more progressive set of infractions. This was, as you can imagine, not an easy assessment for the cheated-upon to perform. Perhaps the cheating was a one-time thing, or perhaps not even that serious. Many of the participants struggled with these issues. They might decide that a conversation alone was tough, but not true infidelity, or that "cheating in any form on your spouse is a deal breaker," as one participant noted.

4. **Acting on the appraisal.** It's clear that Facebook cheating isn't necessarily an all-or-nothing situation. After making the appraisal of whether the relationship constitutes cheating, the partner next has to decide what to do. Do you stay or do you go? Do you even confront your partner at all? What about the other people involved in the online affair? Cravens and her research team identified four choices that the cheated-upon partners had to face as they pondered this next step in their emotional journeys. One possibility was to **confront** the partner, but this approach didn't seem to be all that successful for the participants who used it. Even after the confrontation, they still felt their partner was lying. The second is just to **avoid** a confrontation, giving the partner the benefit of the doubt. The third is more aggressive, and uses **retaliation**. This might involve publicly shaming the offending partner (e.g. passing the Facebook posts around on email lists at the partner's workplace) or just imagining various forms of rough justice against the partner. Some participants went further, and **confronted the others involved** in the cheating. One sent a message to the spouse of the third party to tell him to "check what his wife was up to." None of these possible actions produced particularly desirable outcomes, but they provided some relief to the injured partner's emotional misery, at least temporarily.
5. **Making the relationship decision.** As in offline cheating, partners who are the victims of Internet infidelity face the decision of whether to end it, stick with it, or stay only if the other partner agreed to work on the relationship. Some couldn't decide at all or found that their decision to stay or go varied according to their feelings at the moment.

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Whatever the outcome, no one who was a victim of Facebook cheating felt good, a reaction much like that of any victim of infidelity. **Feeling hurt** was one of the most common reactions (as one individual said so poignantly, "my heart exploded"). However, what distinguishes Facebook cheating from the other forms of infidelity is that Facebook affairs can go on for years undetected, even after the partner vows to stop, due to the ubiquity of the Internet and the ease

of finding ways to communicate in a virtual world.

**Loss of trust** was another common outcome, perhaps again because of the ease with which the affairs can resume without detection. We already saw that at least one participant set up tracking software to monitor the spouse's communications. **Shock** and anger were two additional emotional reactions, again, similar to the way a cheated-on spouse would feel after discovering a consummated affair. Making matters worse was the ease with which the unfaithful partner could deny any wrongdoing as no physical evidence of the affair existed.

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of dealing with Facebook cheating is that this is such a recent phenomenon. We have no epic literature, grand operas, or even a playlist full of Country and Western songs to give us a model of how to think, feel, and respond to an unfaithful Facebook partner. "Your Cheating Status" will most likely never make it to the top of the Billboard charts. In comparison to the torrid clandestine letters and phone calls of the past, Facebook cheating has no boundaries, as it can leak out to anywhere that the Internet reaches. Moreover, the shame and humiliation can be much more public, virally spreading out to a wide-ranging network of friends, co-workers, family members, and individuals in the same real or virtual communities.

Acknowledging that the data from an Internet-based study has its obvious limitations, Cravens and her fellow researchers believe that the results have important clinical implications. Perhaps it's time for couples therapists to expand their understanding of marital infidelity to this new variant on an old theme. The differences, and similarities, with other forms of cheating need to be understood and perhaps new models even created to understand this technological variant on a universal human theme.

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If you've been a victim of Facebook cheating, this research has important implications for you. We've seen that people going through this process experience a range of thoughts and emotions. Being indecisive about what to do, feeling hurt and angry, wanting revenge, or even being ready to accept and try to move on- all are perfectly normal reactions.

Just because the cheating takes place online doesn't mean it's any less painful. Fortunately, like other forms of infidelity, people can and do find ways to move on and find fulfillment in new, or reinvented old, relationships.

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Reference:

Cravens, J. D., Leckie, K.R., & Whiting, J.B. (2013). "Facebook infidelity: When poking becomes problematic." *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal* **35**(1): 74-90.



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