

# SEXTING SENDS A MESSAGE

WHEN PARTNERS LET THEIR FINGERS DO THE CHEATING THEY CAN DIAL UP A WORLD OF TROUBLE, WRITES **CHERYL CRITCHLEY**

**S**HANE Warne might have been sprung sending racy texts, but technology has generally made it easier for people to cheat on their partners. With email, texting, Facebook and Twitter, anyone can communicate secretly at any hour of the day or night. We can even "sext" racy photos or videos. But, as Warne found out, an electronic titillation trail can blow up in your face.

Psychologist Janet Hall has seen it all — including a man who accidentally texted his wife a hot and steamy invite meant for his lover. He even called her by the lover's name. A daughter also discovered her father's lover's emails on his computer and showed her mother.

Partners have always cheated and always will, but technology has moved the goalposts. Because it is accessible at all times, affordable and abundant, Hall says, "it is really easy to have affairs with electronic aids".

"You can text in the toilet, email at 2am and your partner would never guess," she says. It's also easy for a pursuer to seduce someone through the electronic written word. "They can start off with mild frisson and then crank up to full-on hot talk. They avoid direct rejection and gradually groom their target," Hall says.

With so many methods, at what point are you cheating? Must it involve physical touch? Is a text saying "I want to feel my hands all over you" cheating? What about online porn? Hall says you are doing the dirty if you are not telling your partner.

"It doesn't need to be touch as virtual cheating is still cheating," she says. Platonic text talk is also tricky. "If it is excessive, it's probably cheating. There's a fine line between 'just friends' and virtual affairs."

A 43-year-old Melbourne mum of one says sexy texting is unfair and disrespectful. "While it's not a physical act, it is more than 'innocent' flirting that you never intend to go any further," she says, adding that she would snoop if needed, pretending to check the phone for another reason. "I'd rather know and

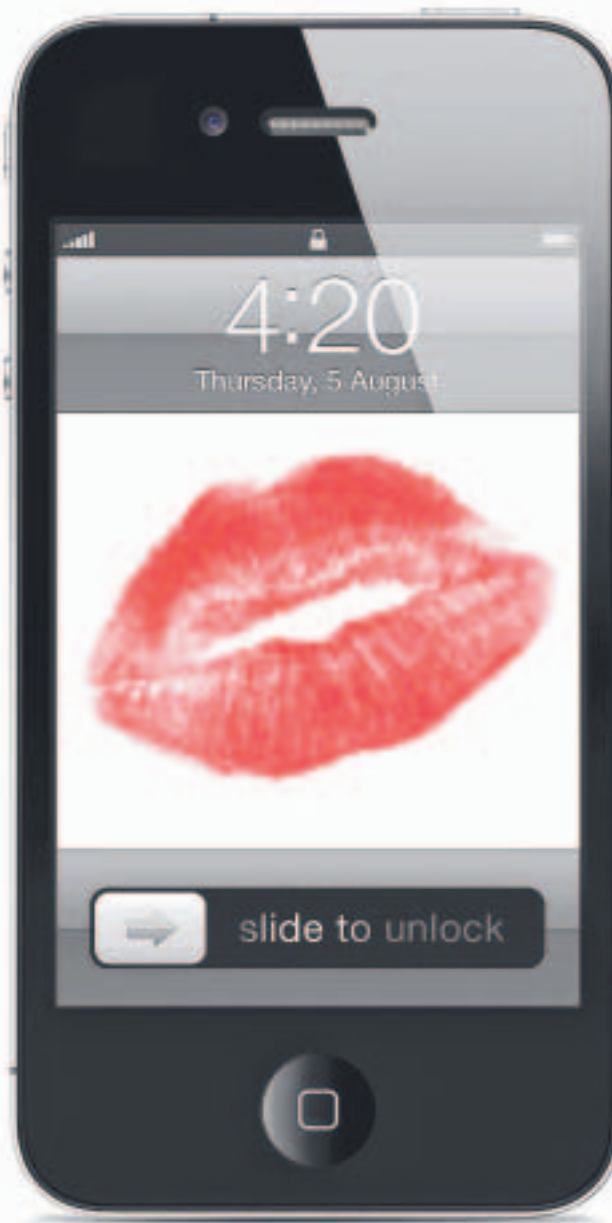
confront and deal with the situation than worry or be treated like crap," she says.

While her partner is faithful, she would give him "one chance only" if he strayed, but only if there were "big factors" such as stress and only if they could agree to move on and not constantly raise the issue. It also depended on who they cheated with and whether it was a one-night or long affair.

A 40-something man in a committed relationship agrees sexy texts are dishonest and "would raise questions about intention". He would not snoop on his partner's messages as trust should be implicit, but thinks relationships can survive an affair "if the will is there and true contrition can be expressed".

It can be done. A friend of a Melbourne woman suspected her partner was cheating and discovered a second mobile phone SIM card filled with details of his illicit rendezvous. "She booted him out, but forgave him eventually and they renewed their vows," Hall says. "I think he had — and still has — a lot of work to do to regain her trust."

She says if you do discover evidence, confront your partner ASAP. "Snooping will just make you feel anxious and angry and bring you down to their level," she says. "If they deny it, however, you may need to be



a 'snoop detective' to get proof."

One thing that hasn't changed is the motivation for affairs, which Hall says boils down to people wanting to be "naughty" and "sexy" at the same time — a powerful chemical cocktail indeed. "Is it in humans' basic instinct to want to attract the other sex even if they are in a committed relationship?" she says. "Yes."

Hall points to recent research that has led therapists to treat injured spouses like war casualties, providing post-traumatic stress debriefings. They've also begun classifying

affairs based on the underlying motive of the straying partner — a factor in a marriage's odds of survival. The studies found that 22-25 per cent of men and 11-15 per cent of women reported they'd had extramarital sex, which researchers say is probably an underestimate.

Can a relationship survive betrayal? Hall says it can if the cheater is remorseful, genuinely feels it was a mistake and can prove it is over. She says if partners still love each other and share common goals, children and assets, it may be worth patching things up if both partners commit. "The cheater must apologise and promise never to do it again," she says. "They must become transparent in their life — especially electronically."

## ASK SANDY

ADVICE FOR LIFE with Sandy Rea



**My partner and I have been living together for two years now. We have both been divorced and each has two teenage children from our marriages. Generally, we seemed to have worked it out, but of course there are times where integrating our families can be challenging. I don't really have a complaint or a problem, but I'm more interested to hear your thoughts on how these transitions and challenges can be managed.** R, Balwyn

Well done! I think there are some fundamental rules that work to make the transition successful. When parents separate, children need to have stability, predictability and clarity in their lives. This is a tough challenge for the primary caregiver when there is likely to be a lot of turmoil and distress for them at the time. Children need to clearly understand that when their parents separate, it is permanent. It is unfair to their stability if the parent who has left continues to actively be a part of the family home (this is quite distinct from being an active part of the child's life). This could suggest that there is hope that the parents will get back together. New roles, new times. Being clear in separation also paves the way for a new partner, which must be handled with sensitivity. Be straightforward and honest with children, discussing consequences and dealing with their emotions. Being separated for two weeks and then introducing a partner is not ideal! After two years,

however, the children should be readily able to cope. And indeed it is the parents' job to ensure they do, without tantrums, petulance or controlling behaviours. People often underestimate the capacity of children — they respond well when being involved with their parents and their partners if they see a couple who are united, caring and laughing. Finally, as you have teenagers, it is important to recognise their developmental trajectory, their sexuality, their needs and how these reflect in their reactions to some of the issues you may present to them.

**We are three women in our mid-20s who work in a call centre. One of our colleagues gives us the creeps with the way he looks at us when we pass him, the way he smells, the clothes he wears, his breath and his attempts to talk to us etc. Any suggestions?** M, C & A, Melbourne

Well, it's making my skin crawl just reading your description. There is power in numbers here. Assuming he is as truly repulsive as you describe, I would imagine his self-esteem and self-image is fairly poor. This is your weapon and your strength. Rather than interact with him individually, try to stick together and overpower him with your collective outstanding interpersonal skills, looks and femininity! Three girls at one time... he'll run for the hills. You can't control those creepy looks, but you can control him trying to interact with you.

**Need some advice? Send your questions to psychologist Sandy Rea at [sandyrea@optusnet.com.au](mailto:sandyrea@optusnet.com.au) or c/o Weekend, Herald Sun, PO Box 14999, Melbourne, Vic 8001. Sandy will read all letters, but regrets she cannot answer them personally.**