Working therapeutically with Internet infidelity

ESRC IAA practitioner training workshop
Internet-related vulnerabilities

1. Anonymity
2. Accessibility
3. Affordability
4. Approximation: Internet offers possibility to approximate real world situations.
5. Acceptability
6. Ambiguity
7. Accommodation: Acting out needs and desires online allows to accommodate conflicting identity aspects.

Anonymity + Accelerated “Intimacy” = Pull of the Internet
Frameworks for working with Internet infidelity

Some published treatment frameworks for Internet infidelity...

- Based on different therapeutic orientations, e.g. solution-focused, transgenerational theories, emotionally focused therapies, object-relations perspective.

- Overlap with counselling concepts for offline infidelity.

- Focus on both, attention to the vulnerabilities within the individual involved in infidelity (7s ‘As’) as well the primary couple’s relationship (also depending on the type of Internet Infidelity).

- Again, our social background, values and believes might effect our work with Internet infidelity (both positively and negatively).
Assessment

- Only 20% of couple therapists seem to ask their clients about internet/cybersex use (Goldberg et al., 2008)

- Failure to ask can lead to significant omissions in counselling planning and interventions. Questions and assessment can help to break through ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’...

- Examples of assessment tools:
  - Internet Addiction Diagnostic Questionnaire (IADQ; Young): http://netaddiction.com/
  - Internet Related Problem Scale (IRPS; Armstrong et al., 2000)
Working therapeutically with Rhianna and Oliver

Watch how the Internet infidelity drama unfolds (episode 3 to 5):

- **Episode 3:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUvOS-JMzXY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUvOS-JMzXY)
- **Episode 4:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XezqJ82Ec4n4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XezqJ82Ec4n4)
- **Episode 5:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtUsTRAizi8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtUsTRAizi8)
Working therapeutically with Rhianna and Oliver

Now imagine Rhianna and Oliver come to couple counselling and discuss two different scenarios in groups:

- What are the critical points in this scenario?
- How would you work with the case?
- What strategies would you use?
Working with Internet infidelity – 6 steps

1. Manage feelings and accountability
2. Set specific goals
3. Develop physical and psychological boundaries
4. Develop awareness regarding underlying issues
5. Explore unique circumstances
6. Work towards forgiveness
1. Manage feelings and accountability

- Managing the responses after the revelation of the affair
- Giving non-involved partner space/a voice to be heard by the involved partner – help involved partner to understand the feelings of partner.
- Addressing rationalisation: Involved partners often rationalise their online behaviour (online exchanges are ‘not real’ -> ‘not cheating’). Attempt to minimise the impact of their action on the relationship.
- Exploring and establishing the actual events and the impact on each partner:
  - What do you know actually happened?
  - What was the actual behaviour/activity?
  - How did you feel?
  - How did it impact on you?
2. Set specific goals

- Do you both want to save the relationship?
- Have you ended the online affair, or are you prepared to do so?
- Are there indications of other forms of online or non Internet sexual acting out?’
- What are each of your expectations about future online sexual pursuits?’
- What is needed to rebuild trust in the relationship and what first step is each of you prepared to make?
3. Develop physical and psychological boundaries

- Develop physical boundaries: Key step that can help to promote safety within the relationship. Often only a temporary solution – but can be helpful in rebuilding trust.

- Possible agreements: less accessible computer location, restrictions on certain websites, monitoring software, presence of uninvolved partner when using the computer (no secrecy)

- Develop psychological boundaries: revisit and adapt relationship contracts (often implicit) and develop a common understanding of what to consider as betrayal of their commitment.

- Possible questions for the couple:
  - When and where is computer/internet use appropriate?
  - What rules are associated with the problem?
4. Work on underlying needs

- Implicit theory: Internet infidelity as an easy escape or distraction from ongoing relationship issues, such as e.g. poor communication, sexual dissatisfaction, conflicts in parenting etc (similar to offline infidelity)

- Internet infidelity offers intimacy with detachment for individuals who struggle with intimacy and emotional expression/commitment.

- Explore unfulfilled emotional and relational needs

- Explore relationship history, possible infidelity pattern throughout the generations, positive relationship experiences etc.

- Help both partners to develop an understanding of the context in their relationship and what potential function the online affair might have had.
5. Explore unique circumstances

- Establish whether problems are caused by addictive behaviour (sex or internet addiction – see table in Jones & Hertlein, 2012).

- Commonly compulsions are considered within the individual and can shift counselling strategy to a more individualised focus, or even referral.

- Identify any medical or physical health problems (e.g. sexual dysfunctions, menopause, erectile problems) that might be associate with one partner looking for sexual interactions online.

- Explore relationship and gender specific expectations for both individuals. Possible differences in how they view betrayal may affect their understanding of the relationship contract.

- Explore role and importance of third person in the case (if at all)
6. Work towards rebuilding trust

- Explore the willingness to rebuild trust and move towards forgiveness

- Possible questions:

  - What do you need to rebuild trust?

  - What will contribute to you being able to make the decision to forgive and move on?