

GAY RELATIONSHIP EXPERTS ALAN DOWNS AND JOE KORT ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS

THIS MONTH: JOE KORT ON INFIDELITY

*'I can't stop cheating on my boyfriend'***Dear Attitude,**

I'm in a long-term relationship with a man I'm absolutely crazy about but I have a problem in that I keep cheating on him. I never mean to do it and always feel dreadful afterwards. I always vow I'll never play away again, so I've never told my partner. I'm terrified of hurting him and want to stop but I can't control myself. Sometimes

I'll fall into bed with someone after a night out but sometimes it just happens when I'm bored and surfing online. It's a pattern that's happened in previous relationships I've been in and led to me breaking up with my last boyfriend. I don't want to ruin this relationship as well. ♣

**SIMON, EXETER****Dear Simon,**

There can be so many different reasons for this type of behaviour and I will go through each one I know of to help you rule out what you think it is for you.

The first thing I notice is that this bothers you, or you would not be writing in about it. People enter therapy for cheating either because they were caught by a partner, it ended a relationship and/or they catch themselves and know that it doesn't fit with their values and the types of relationship they really want. The fact that you feel dreadful about it is a positive indicator that you are acting out something that is not aligned with how you want to be – or the way in which you see yourself.

**Do you come from a family in which one or both of your parents cheated?**

There is a high correlation between those who cheat in their relationships and those raised in families where affairs occurred. So many people say they didn't even know their parent was cheating while growing up and find out later in life.

I always say that children are little spies and see and hear everything. While they may not have overtly known of the cheating, they may have overheard conversations about it or adults speculating about the other parent's cheating. Frequently people will say they remember their parents arguing over infidelity, or their mothers or fathers accusing the other of looking too much, flirting too much or downright cheating. This over-stimulates children, who do not know what to make of it, and it gets stored somewhere in the unconscious. As adults, either they cheat or they find a partner who cheats and re-enact the same situation their parent was in.

*continued overleaf*

Illustration DERMOT FLYNN

**What to do:**

Ask your parents and siblings if anything like this went on in your house. You don't have to accuse anyone of anything – you can just ask if this was ever something anyone was concerned about while you were growing up. You also don't need to share with any of your family – unless you wish to – about your own infidelity issues. You just want to reflect on whether or not you are carrying a family legacy of cheating that you may not be conscious of.

**Eroticised anger: Are there problems in your current relationship?**

Sometimes there are negative feelings towards a partner that one cannot express well or at all, and thus cheating is a way of doing that. The anger at the partner becomes eroticised and a person will cheat and have sex outside the relationship. This is not justification to go outside one's relationship and cheat, but if there are problems which are not being addressed or worked on, then a partner might find themselves acting out their negative feelings by getting validation and acceptance from people outside the relationship.

We used to believe in the field of psychology that most cheating was a result of a bad relationship. However, we no longer believe this and now realise that people cheat for all kinds of reasons that have nothing to do with the partnership. Are there things you want sexually in your relationship that you are not talking about with your partner? Are you dissatisfied with the romantic realm of your partnership and finding yourself looking elsewhere?

**What to do:**

Talk to your partner about anything you are frustrated with or angry about. Find ways to express yourself to ensure you are not acting out anything angry towards him. Explore if there are issues here that are similar to the last time you were caught dissolving a relationship. Perhaps you need to learn from this and behave differently.

**Were you sexually abused?**

Sometimes childhood sexual abuse can rear its head by causing compulsive sexual acting out as an adult if it has not been healed or resolved. Hypersexual behaviour is the main symptom of unresolved childhood sexual abuse.

You talk about your sexual behaviour as if it is out of your control and that makes me wonder about sexual abuse in your past. Sexual abuse can be overt and covert. Overt abuse is obvious where you were penetrated, digitally manipulated or masturbated, and you know that the interaction was directly sexual. Covert sexual abuse is more indirect, such as being called names regarding the way you expressed your masculinity and thus being gender-bashed and shamed; being hugged and kissed in inappropriate ways by an adult either in or outside of your family; and nudity by adults who wanted either to be seen or to watch you, which felt uncomfortable and/or sexual to you.

**What to do:**

This is a hard topic to raise with your parents without them becoming immediately defensive, even if sexual abuse did not occur. Often there are family stories about an uncle or family friend whose behaviour was inappropriate. You may be able to ask questions about anything like that around siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles to see if anything like this existed in your family. Read a book on childhood sexual abuse to see if anything resonates for you.

**Are you sexually addicted or compulsive?**

The main elements that drive sexual addiction are loss of control, continuing to engage in the sexual behaviour despite negative consequences and failed attempts to stop or control it. Boredom, as you state, is a major reason for surfing online. Research shows that it is the number one reason why people become sexually compulsive and can result in sexual addiction if not kept in check.

I would challenge you when you write that you can't control yourself and that you 'just fall into bed with someone' or that 'it just happens' when you are surfing the net. Both of these statements are passive and lack acceptance of accountability. I know it feels this way but now you have made the step to reach out for help and accept full responsibility.

**What to do:**

I recommend going to Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA) meetings, even if it turns out you are not a sex addict. The only requirement for attendance is the desire to stop unwanted sexual behaviour. SAA offers cognitive and behavioural tools that can help anyone with out-of-control sexual behaviour. (Also Sex And Love Addicts Anonymous.)

**Are you suffering from unresolved internalised homophobia?**

Most gay men don't consider that they have unresolved internalised homophobia. After coming out, many gay men think that everything is OK and never look back to examine if anything from their childhood growing up gay in an anti-gay world is being brought into the present and the future.

Let's face it, we are taught to run away from each other as children and not allowed to pursue a close intimate relationship (let alone a friendship), with each other well into our teens – and for many of us much later. This template contributes to so many gay men being unable to form intimate relationships with other men, and cheating is one of the ways they avoid intimacy.

**Do you really want to be monogamous?**

This is a question I ask all my clients in this situation. So often people are trying to push themselves into categories they think they

should be in but don't really want. I notice this with gay men who are upset that they are not in relationships and have dated for years, when the truth is that they don't really want to be in a relationship but think they should be because it's what they are taught by society.

In your case, make sure that monogamy is right for you and that you really want it. Maybe you want to be in an open relationship but cannot accept this. Studies are now showing us that monogamy is not our natural state. Monogamy is a choice and you have to decide if that is the right choice for you.

Regardless of the reasons that drive your sexual acting out, it is you who is making choices to engage in cheating behaviour that is causing you – and potentially your partner – grief and could end your relationship. I want you to take full responsibility and figure this out for yourself. You can do so by finding a therapist and taking a look at your behaviour more closely.

Email us with your relationship or sexual problem to [advice@attitude.co.uk](mailto:advice@attitude.co.uk)

*Dr Joe Kort is a licensed clinical social worker and board-certified sexologist. He is best known for being the author of 10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do To Improve Their Lives. [joekort.com](http://joekort.com)*

## Boredom and surfing online is the main reason why people become sexually compulsive