

Web of deception

By Ruth Ostrow

MY recent column on children and the internet proved one of my most popular to date as we all struggle to come to terms with this brave new medium.

This week I have an even more disturbing cyber tale - concerning adults. In trying to educate myself about cyberspace, I chanced upon one of the raunchier dating sites.

Curious to explore a world I'd heard so much about, I created a profile of myself to post on the site. Using a pseudonym, I described myself in a most alluring way, knocking years off my age and adding centimetres to my breast size.

Within a day of the profile being posted, I had over 50 hits from men interested in meeting me. The modus operandi is that once you've established "chat-room" contact, you then send photos via the site, then contact details, then arrange to meet.

While I received a daily array of mug shots, I was also sent a large proportion of "anatomical" photos.

When I asked why, I started getting an insight into the world of cyber-deception. The sender was usually a married man wanting to tantalise and score a date without leaving evidence.

I stayed online for a few weeks. Of the 100 or so hits a week I was getting, about half were from cheating husbands. Most were prepared to chat openly when I asked blunt questions. The excuses for cheating were varied but many seemed to follow a theme: the wife had lost interest in having sex with them. Some said it was the other way around, but the vast majority claimed to be the ones feeling overlooked - an interesting social phenomenon if true.

However, the real shock came from another startling phenomenon. My partner had also posted a profile to see if the converse was true. Though his hit rate was far less than mine, some married women did contact him. But we estimated that a quarter of his pursuers were married men! Those prepared to chat said they "loved" their wives and kids but had a "secret side" their partners wouldn't understand.

As a former sex and relationships writer I rarely get shocked. But I am shocked by the level of deception out there in the 'burbs. What your kids are up to online is nothing compared to what your partner might be doing behind closed doors.

Where cyberspace is concerned, "be afraid, be very afraid"!

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