

More Than Just A Friend? Can This Be A Warning Sign?

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“We were just co-workers, hardly friends. Then we happened to be at the same fast food joint at the same time and ended up sitting together. We talked about work, had a few laughs and walked back to the office together. A couple of days later, we bumped into each other in the copy room right at lunch time and ended up going out for a burger. It was completely innocent at first, but I found I was making up reasons to show up at the same places we’d met before. I began to wonder what a kiss would be like; what something more might be like. That scared me to death. That’s why I’ve come to talk to you.”

This story often has a different ending. Wondering leads to planning and planning leads to execution. Kissing turns to more and soon, there is a full blown affair. This story is a kind of model of *how* it happens, but not *why* it happens. There are competing theories, but I’d like to share the one I’ve developed during the almost 30 years I’ve worked with couples.

The premise is simple: **people are not pulled out of happy marriages.** As the bonds of a satisfying relationship weaken, the participants tend to look outside the relationship for those needs they once met there. This doesn’t always result in an affair, but it does tend to result in some activity to fill the void, perhaps over-involvement in a hobby, that further weakens the bond.

There are some obvious and not so obvious **warning signs** that you’re not paying enough attention to your marriage. As discussed above, an obvious sign is you find yourself thinking or fantasizing about someone other than your partner. An occasionally stray thought about someone isn’t something to be concerned over, but if you return again and again in your mind to that person, be concerned.

A more **subtle warning** sign requires that you think about the last year or so. Have there been changes in your patterns with your partner? Maybe you find you’re watching one TV while your partner is watching the other. Again, if this is a now and then thing, don’t worry, but if it is something that has increased over time, be

concerned. Do you find you feel more critical of your partner or feel criticized by your partner more than you have in the past? Do you find various kinds of affection between the two of you has become less frequent? Do you find you confide more in others or complain about your marriage or your partner, even in a joking fashion, more to others than you did? These are indicators of erosion in the relationship.

If you detect pattern shifts or wandering thoughts, **what steps can you take?** Here are three.

- **Look first at yourself.** It’s tempting to think your partner is the reason or cause of these changes, but you should first look inward. Be honest about how you have contributed to what’s going on. For example, if you’re not satisfied with the amount of affection, how has your behavior contributed to that? When you think you know, you now have something you can work to change. Perhaps you don’t like the *quality* of time you spend together. Take the initiative to improve it.
- **Talk to your partner about the relationship.** Usually easier for women than for men to do, this is very important. It’s importance increases if you tried some things based on the first bullet point and you weren’t satisfied with the improvement. When you decide to have this conversation, make sure (a) you describe how you wish things were, (b) you blame no one for the way they are, and (c) you listen to your partner’s view about the relationship.
- **Pray for the two of you.** Make this a daily habit for several weeks and *do this before* you embark on either self examination or talking with your partner. Ask God for the Spirit’s guidance in your quest for peace in your marriage. Pray for openness in your heart and in your partner’s heart. Pray for gentleness of spirit and a renewed sense of commitment, both in yourself and in your partner. Ask for courage and patience. End each prayer with words of thanks for the love that you two have shared and will share and for God’s love for you both.