**The Risk of Opposite-sex Friendships in Marriage**

**by Willard F. Harley, Jr.**

I've found that when people rate their most painful experiences, their spouse's affair usually gets the top rating. For that reason alone, couples should avoid an affair at all costs because of the suffering it causes the betrayed spouse.

But there are many other reasons to avoid an affair. It's terribly damaging to the couple's children, and even to members of the extended family. And it also has devastating economic consequences for most couples that have experienced an affair.

Yet, I estimate that over sixty percent of all couples will suffer through an affair at some point in their marriage. As damaging as an affair is, you are likely to experience it in your marriage unless you take extraordinary precautions to avoid it.

The first place to look for the highest risks for an affair is to consider who is most likely to be an affair partner. It's a friend of the opposite sex. More people have affairs with that person than with anyone else. And the closer the friendship, the more likely the affair. So a reasonable precaution to avoid an affair is to avoid opposite-sex friendships.

But does that mean that all of these friendships are equally risky? Can't some of them be benign? It all depends on how many love units a friend of the opposite sex can deposit in your Love Bank.

To review my most basic concept (the [Love Bank](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3200_love.html)), whenever someone of the opposite sex makes enough Love Bank deposits to breach the romantic love threshold in their account, romantic love for that person is triggered in you. That person of the opposite sex becomes irresistible and that irresistibility, in turn, makes you somewhat irrational regarding the wisdom of the relationship -- you want that person to be in your life at all costs.

Opposite-sex friends have an unusual opportunity to make massive Love Bank deposits. They can meet so many [emotional needs](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3300_needs.html) that it's likely that they will breach the romantic love threshold -- unless you do something to prevent that from happening.

Technically, all friendships make Love Bank deposits. But when an opposite-sex friend meets the most important emotional needs of[affection](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3305_aff.html) (expressions of care and concern), [intimate conversation](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3315_conv.html) (conversation about personal problems being faced, and topics of personal interest), [recreational companionship](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3320_rec.html) (spending time together enjoying common recreational activities), [honesty and openness](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3325_hon.html) (revealing personal feelings, past history, present activities, and plans for the future), [physical attractiveness](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3330_att.html), or [admiration](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3350_ad.html) (expressions of respect, value, and appreciation), romantic love is almost sure to follow.

You may have noticed that I have not mentioned [sex](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3310_sex.html). That's because almost everyone realizes that an opposite-sex friendship with someone who tries to meet a [sexual need](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3310_sex.html) should be off-limits. It's friends who meet these other needs I've mentioned that can slip under the radar. If it's a non-sexual friendship that is with an attractive, or affectionate, or conversant, or recreational, or honest and open, or admiring friend, should that friendship be off limits? It's those friendships that often lead to affairs.

These dangerous relationships are usually private, personal, and bilateral. They're private in the sense that conversation is generally one-on-one, and sometimes kept secret because the spouse would be threatened in some way by it if it were done with the spouse present. It's personal in the sense that personal information is revealed, especially problems faced in life, along with a willingness to help if needed. And it's bilateral in the sense that both people share information with each other and prove that they have what it takes to help each other.

It goes without saying that if one spouse has a friend that threatens the other spouse in any way, the [Policy of Joint Agreement](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3500_policy.html) dictates that the relationship should be modified or ended completely depending on what can be enthusiastically agreed upon by the spouses.

But I take it one step further to warn couples that any friendship with someone of the opposite sex should be carefully evaluated because of the risks involved. Even if a couple is in enthusiastic agreement, I recommend that a friendship with someone who was a former lover should be ended. Also, a friendship with someone who you feel might actually make enough deposits to breach the romantic love threshold should be ended. Don't take unnecessary chances.

To summarize my criterion for off-limits acquaintances of the opposite sex:

1. Any friend of the opposite sex that is not enthusiastically agreed upon by your spouse.
2. Any friend of the opposite sex that had been a former lover.
3. Any friend of the opposite sex that you know might have what it takes to trigger a feeling of romantic love (or may have already triggered that feeling in the past).
4. Any friend of the opposite sex that meets your need for affection (expressions of care and concern), intimate conversation (conversation about personal problems being faced, and topics of personal interest), recreational companionship (spending time together enjoying common recreational activities), honesty and openness (revealing personal feelings, past history, present activities, and plans for the future), physical attractiveness, or admiration (expressions of respect, value, and appreciation). This is especially important when your friend does a better job meeting your needs than your spouse in any of these areas. In that case you should drop everything you're doing to immediately fix the problem.

But even if your spouse does a better job meeting these needs, a friend can make enough Love Bank deposits by meeting these need for you that you may wake up one morning in love with that person. And if that happens your judgment will be severely damaged.

1. Any friend of the opposite sex with whom you have a private, personal, and bilateral relationship. It's private in the sense that conversation is generally one-on-one, and sometimes kept secret because the spouse would be threatened in some way by it if it were done with the spouse present. It's personal in the sense that personal information is revealed, especially problems faced in life, along with a willingness to help if needed. And it's bilateral in the sense that both people share personal information with each other and have proven that they have what it takes to help each other.

Evaluate your opposite-sex friendships. Are any of them a risk to your marriage? If they meet any of the criterion I've mentioned, you should take the extraordinary precaution of eliminating them from your lives. Be sure that your spouse is your very best friend, the one who meets your most important emotional needs, and keeps his or her account far above the romantic love threshold. Protect your Love Bank from outside threats.