Is sexting cheating? [1]

Dear Alice,

I was snooping on my boyfriend's phone this morning while he was in the shower (I know, bad). I was not snooping because I distrusted my bf, but because there is this one girl I don't trust. I found more than I bargained for. She had sent him a topless photo of herself and he followed it up with comments about how turned on the photo made him.

I am devastated. I have no idea how to confront him about this. I love him so much and we have been together almost two years. My question is: Is sexting cheating? I always told him that if he cheated on me, it was over. But he didn't technically cheat... it was texting. But I feel like he cheated on me. Am I overreacting? How on earth do I confront him?

Thanks and please help,
Hurt in TX

Answer

Dear Hurt in TX,

You raise a very thought-provoking question, and one that (as you might guess) has no easy answers. Cheating is in the eye of the beholder. Or rather, the eyes of the beholders — meaning that it’s up to the two of you to decide what constitutes cheating in the context of your relationship. Some people would define what your boyfriend did as cheating, while others would not. In all cases, good communication and transparency are essential. Read on for some questions to think through as you prepare for this conversation.

You asked how to confront your boyfriend — waiting until you’re calm and able to clearly articulate your feelings may be a good place to start. During this time, consider reflecting on why this incident was so upsetting for you. For some people, sexting with a person outside of your relationship may be okay only if it’s going well. For example, if you’re not getting certain needs met (i.e., emotional, sexual, time together, etc.), seeing this type of engagement with another person may feel more painful than it would if all’s going well. For others, such communication with another person would hurt no matter the current circumstances of the relationship. It’s also good to think about your goals for the conversation. If you ask your boyfriend about the text
messages and he believes that he wasn’t cheating, does this mean that you’d also be allowed to sext other people? Would you want to? Have the two of you discussed the parameters of your relationship regarding sex, sexting, or flirting with others? What would you want for yourself in this regard?

If you decide to bring this issue up with your boyfriend, consider that he may be upset that you were checking his phone while he was in the shower. Do you two typically have access to each others' texts? You say you trust your boyfriend, not this other woman, yet checking your boyfriend’s phone may be interpreted otherwise. Could it be that he exhibits other behaviors that cause you to question his trust? Or is it something unrelated? It may be that you don't trust him, and if this is the case, it’s good to explore the reasons why, as well as what led you to check his phone.

When you’re ready, it might be helpful to ask your boyfriend to set some time aside to talk. Explaining the situation and how you felt when you saw the texts could be a good way to start the conversation. You may also ask if he feels as though he’s getting what he needs out of the relationship. Being able to talk through these factors will hopefully allow you two to work through this situation and any other underlying relationship concerns you have. Ideally, this conversation could provide an opportunity for both of you to understand more deeply what’s happening in your relationship and get clarity about what types of sexual engagement outside of the relationship (if any) are acceptable.

Good luck and take care,

Alice!
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