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Opposite-sex friends travel slippery slope

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It's a risky world out there for married people who are friends with a member of the opposite sex. Just ask Sen. John McCain.

The Republican presidential candidate's relationship with Vicki Iseman, a female lobbyist, was the subject this month in a New York Times story and, as a result, subsequent newspaper articles, blog posts and radio commentary. He has denied that the relationship was anything other than simple friendship.

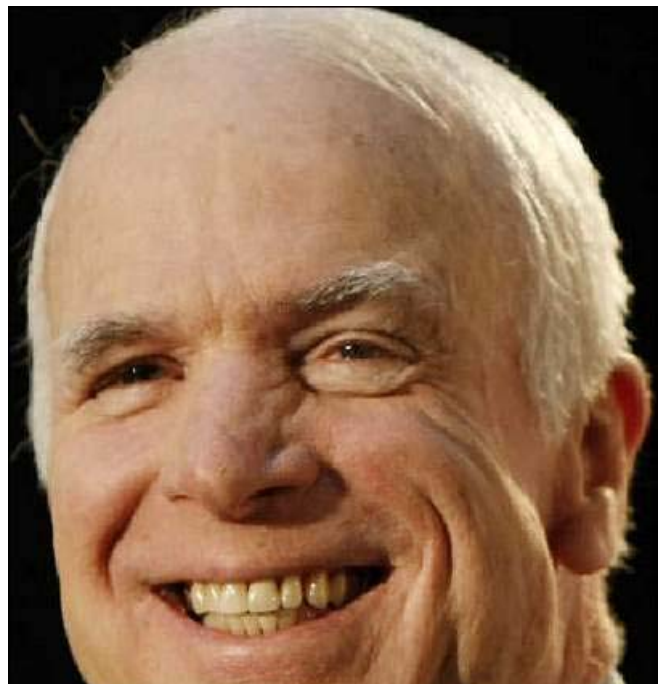
In his case, the furor centered largely on whether the woman had special political access. In less high-profile cases, the reaction is focused more personally – on whether a friendship is harming a marriage.

It's not that partnered men and women can't be friends with people of the opposite sex. It's just that with divorce rampant – nearly one in two marriages ends in divorce, and even greater percentages of unmarried relationships fizzle – marriage can seem pretty fragile.

"We become concerned when a married person develops a close



Iseman



McCain

friendship with a person of the opposite sex," says Thomas Bradbury, psychologist and principal investigator of the Marriage and Family Development Study at the University of California, Los Angeles. "The problem is that these perceptions are not always misplaced. People have affairs, and they can begin in exactly this way."

Men and women in opposite-gender friendships must tread carefully, behavior and psychology experts say. They also must remember which relationship comes first.

In part, friendship leading to romance happens because what people are looking for in a mate overlaps with what people look for in friendships – companionship, intimacy and, often, validation that they're attractive to the opposite sex, says April Bleske-Rechek, psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire.

When men and women look for a mate, they look for someone who is similar to them in intelligence, attractiveness, worldview, values, height and weight. The trouble is, friends look for people who are similar in those ways as well.

"People can be friends," Bleske-Rechek says. "But are they just friends? It's a loaded question because friendships and mateships coincide."

Friendships between genders often lead to marriage, but after it does, outside friendships between men and women can complicate people's lives. And the complication is often sexual attraction.

Regardless of who is attracted to whom in the friendship, neither gender considers romantic interest a good thing among friends. Only 10 percent of men say that attraction is a benefit to such a friendship, and 1 percent of women see it as a benefit, according to research Bleske-Rechek will present in May at the annual meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association.

About 15 percent of men with close female friends say that if their friend is sexually attractive to them, it makes their lives more difficult; 33 percent of women say finding a male friend attractive complicates their lives.

But the difficulty they cite most often is their spouse's jealousy. For about 25 percent of middle-aged men and 45 percent of middle-aged women, an opposite-sex friendship is not OK with the spouse.

The spouse might be on to something. There are, indeed, people who profess friendship but intend to steal another's mate. About half of 236 college-age men and women surveyed in a June 2001 study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* said they had tried to attract another's partner at least once. And 85 percent of them said someone had tried to attract them away from a mate at least once. The gossip mess that results has a term, coined in the book "The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating," by David Buss, psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

The term is "mate poaching."

Research published in the April 2004 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* by an international team found the personality traits of people who try to steal the mates of others, as well as those who succumb, are universal.

"Can already mated people have opposite-sex friendships?" asks David Schmitt, professor of psychology at Bradley University in Peoria, Ill., who helped conduct that research. "I think they can."

But the hard data he found suggest that as much as 15 percent of the time, such relationships end in a poach.

No wonder tongues cluck and fingers wag. Wary husbands and wives have an uneasy sense of the temptations out there, even if they trust their spouses.

"It's like when your teenage daughter goes to a concert dressed like a slut," Bleske-Rechek says. "She says, 'I'm not going to do anything.' And her father says, 'It's not you I'm worried about.'"

Estimates of extramarital affairs, one form of mate poaching, range from 20 percent to 50 percent, depending on the sample and methods of multiple studies. With temptation that common, says Helen Fisher, anthropologist at Rutgers University and author of "Why We Love," opposite-sex friends can expect a friendship, at some point, to cross the flirtation line. They need to be ready to deflect temptation.

"Start out by putting a picture of your wife or husband on your desk," she says. "And talk about them a lot."

Women should make a point of meeting their male friend's wife, men of meeting the husband of a woman friend.

"Meet the wife and fawn on her," Fisher says of her own technique as a single woman.

"Choose her side of the table to sit on. Make eye contact with her. If you can tell her you've got a boyfriend you love, that'll help." Make the spouse a friend too, with the goal of defusing jealousy, of making the spouse feel that the friendship is no threat.

To silence wagging tongues, opposite-sex "just friends" shouldn't touch, shouldn't share bites of food over lunch, shouldn't stand too close to each other. Crossing those lines fuels gossip.

Worse, it can lead to the slippery slope of greater intimacy. But if people talk, and there's nothing to talk about, "you've got to

just flat-out deny it," Fisher says.

Above all, says Stanley Charnofsky, therapist and psychology professor at California State University, Northridge, put your mate first. It's not just an affair that can feel like betrayal, he says.

"Is there such a thing as a non-sexual affair? What if you go for coffee at 10 o'clock every day with someone from work and talk intimately with them," he says. "Then you go home, and you don't talk to your spouse."

The platonic friend is getting some of the spouse's major perks, even if it isn't sex.

Keep your spouse informed, he says.

Tell your partner about your friend and what you've talked about. Respect a spouse's feelings.

"Opposite-sex friendships are possible. They're healthy," Charnofsky says. "But they definitely have to be lower than, lesser than, the one with your mate. They have to be secondary."

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