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Confession: We cyberspied!

We've all been tempted to look where we shouldn't. But what causes someone to cross the line? Three women reveal why they stooped to snoop. By Mélanie Berliet

THE EXCUSE

Sheer curiosity

When Carol Grant (whose name has been changed, like those of the other women here) saw that her boyfriend had left his email open, she couldn't stop herself from reading his messages. That's when the 34-year-old found flirty exchanges with women he'd met on Craigslist. Devastated, she confronted him. Her boyfriend reassured her that he hadn't gotten together with any of the women, and he promised not to dally on the site again. Grant wasn't thrilled, but she forgave him (partly because she felt guilty about prying).

THE SNOOPING SCOOP It's hard to resist a tempting opportunity like reading a partner's unguarded email—it's how we're wired. "The novelty and fear of detective work increase dopamine levels, which tickles our brain's reward system," says Helen Fisher, Ph.D., a biological anthropologist in New York City. Another motivator: "We're often driven to uncover every detail about a partner, not because we suspect anything but in hopes of getting closer," says Rachel Sussman, a couples counselor in NYC. But the reality is, it can drive us further apart. "And there's the risk of overreacting to or misinterpreting what you see."



Forty-one percent of women would be mortified if caught snooping, according to a Self.com poll.

THE EXCUSE

Cold, hard evidence

Jo Taylor was shocked to get a call from her boyfriend's ex-wife; she hadn't known he was ever married. When asked why he'd kept mum, he said it was because he worried she'd overreact. So Taylor, 25, began secretly monitoring his email. When she told him his messages to a coworker were "too friendly," they fought. But he worked to regain her trust by leaving his phone out and sharing his passwords; soon, she stopped peeking. "It wasn't worth getting upset over info that was probably harmless," she says.

THE SNOOPING SCOOP

When you know your mate has been dishonest, snooping can feel justified, Sussman says: "Getting the facts on how extreme his betrayal has been might help you decide if the relationship can survive." But a more honest tactic is asking your partner directly, Dr. Birndorf says. "If he's willing to open up, you can figure out together what to do next."

THE EXCUSE A suspicious hunch

Cari Cho, 27, had been feeling uneasy about her relationship with her boyfriend, mostly because she didn't quite know where she stood. So one morning, she impulsively grabbed his phone and scrolled through his email until she saw the subject line "Meet me in Central Park at 9 A.M." Concerned, Cho asked him what was up. He opened the message and showed her that it was spam. "I felt horrible that I'd questioned his fidelity," she says. "Plus, my actions made it obvious I was feeling insecure, which tipped the power balance in his direction."

THE SNOOPING SCOOP Insecurity is a typical catalyst for spying, Dr. Birndorf says. Any number of things can sow doubt, even if there's no evidence of wrongdoing: jealousy of your guy's female friends, anxiety about a few pounds you've gained, nerves about your recently-turned-tepid sex life or even an unrelated issue, like drama with your boss or a friend, that you're projecting onto the relationship. "When we're feeling powerless in other areas, getting knowledge on the sly can offer a sense of control," Dr. Birndorf says. "But that comes at the expense of violating a partner's trust. Besides, the spying probably won't ease your underlying anxieties." Instead, think about what's really bugging you—with your partner or otherwise—and address that directly to feel more self-confident.

84% of women have snooped on a mate, online or off. Forty-three percent said they did it out of curiosity. Source: Self.com poll

click! CAN'T STOP E-STALKING YOUR EX? You're not alone: Sixty-two percent of singles feel as if they look at an ex's FB profile too often, a YourTango poll finds. Get Dr. Birndorf's tips on how to get over him for good at Self.com/health.