

Seven Tips for Avoiding an Office Affair

Every Wednesday is Tip Day.

This Wednesday: Seven – maybe – tips for avoiding an office affair.

A friend told me that when she started her job at a big company a few years ago, a family friend, who also worked there, pulled her aside to give her some advice.

Many people in their workplace had affairs, he said, and he'd seen lots of marriages break up. He'd kept his own marriage strong by following five rules about the workplace, and he urged her to keep the same rules:

- 1. Never take a first step in flirtation, even in jest.**
- 2. Never have more than one drink with people from work.** If that.
- 3. Never confide details from my personal life to people from work, and don't allow them to confide in me.**
- 4. Never allow myself to have a “special friend” of the attractive sex** (sometimes called a “work spouse”) **to whom I turn for particular support.** (This is sometimes called an “emotional affair.”)
- 5. Unless it's an unmistakably professional context, don't meet alone with a colleague or client of the attractive sex.** E.g, when a client calls with tickets for the baseball game, don't go in a twosome.

He explained the reasoning behind his advice (which would apply to people in any long-term relationship, married or not).

There comes a time in every relationship, he said, when a couple doesn't get along very well. This period might even last several years. Difficult kids, difficult schedules, health worries, money worries, and all the rest can create a lot of conflict.

If you have an intimate friend at work, someone who knows you very well, and understands your troubles, and appreciates you properly, and can offer you a sympathetic, conflict-free refuge from your annoying spouse/partner, the temptation to turn to that person is very strong.

Or if you're alone with someone, on a business trip, or out drinking – you might give in to a sudden impulse.



Are these helpful tips? From a happiness-at-work perspective, some of them give me pause. In particular, I think #3 sounds awfully draconian. Studies show that people who have friends at work are happier than people who don't, and it would be hard to have close friends if you followed Tip #3. In general, too, these tips put a constraint on work relationships, which are among the most important relationships we have.

Nevertheless, thinking back to my days working in an office, I think there's some real value to these injunctions. They're worth thinking over, to adapt to each person's particular situation.

In particular, I think people assume that it's pretty straightforward to decide, "I would never have an affair" – that it's just a matter of good character and solid values. But in practice, temptation can sometimes arise over a very long period of time, and not look the way we expect. Gradually, slowly, a relationship's nature changes. Or by contrast, sometimes a very stressful or intense moment creates a sudden energy which, in the right environment, can lead to an affair.

La Rochefoucauld wrote, "It is much easier to extinguish a first desire than to satisfy all of those that follow it." I think that some people, quite innocently, can get started down a path that will lead them into temptation. It's not easy to resist temptation, once it's presented, and this man developed his five strategies to keep himself from getting to that point.

I've heard two additional tips about avoiding an office affair, from other people:

6. Imagine your spouse/partner as an audience – cc'd on the email, listening to the phone call, walking suddenly into the conference room. If you'd feel uncomfortable in that situation, you've crossed some line.

7. If you develop a close relationship with someone from the attractive sex at work, get to know his or her family. That puts a damper on starting an affair.

What do you think? Do you agree with these tips? Do you think they're too restrictive? Unnecessary? Would you suggest other strategies?

* So many people I know have great books publishing this month! Daniel Pink's *Drive*, Alexandra Levit's *New Job, New You*, Robyn Okrant's *Living Oprah...* Today is exciting -- the actual day that my friend Therese Borchard's *Beyond Blue: Surviving Depression & Anxiety and Making the Most of Bad Genes* comes out. It's an honest, but also funny, account of living with depression. Also, my fellow fans of St. Therese of Lisieux -- Therese talks a lot about St. Therese.

* *It's Word-of-Mouth Day, when I gently encourage (or, you might think, pester) you to spread the word about the Happiness Project. You might:*

-- Forward the link to someone you think would be interested

-- Link to a post on Twitter (follow me @gretchenrubin).

