

More than 37 million cheating spouses worldwide have heard the [news this week](#) that details of their sexual fantasies and other personal information have been accessed from the website Ashley Madison. The hackers are threatening to make the information public unless the site is closed down.

Ashley Madison is an online service for people who want to have an affair without their partner's knowledge. Promising absolute discretion, their tag-line is "Life is short, have an affair".

Exposure as a client of such a service could obviously have serious consequences for the reputations and relationships of those involved. But the public disclosure of their secret sexual fantasies may cause them even more embarrassment. Most of us have sexual fantasies – [evidence](#) suggests that fantasising about sex is almost universal – but we'd prefer to keep our fantasies to ourselves.

A [sexual fantasy](#) is a mental image that is sexually arousing or erotic. Fantasies may be based on memories of an actual experience or plans for future sexual activities. They may be realistic or completely fanciful. They may be things you really want to do, or things you would never consider doing in reality.

A recent [survey](#) of 1,516 Canadian adults examined the prevalence of 55 sexual fantasies and found that 83.4% of men and 66.3% of women had fantasised about having sex with someone they know who is not their spouse.

However, we often do not act on such fantasies, and we are [unlikely to tell others](#) about our sexual fantasies, even our sexual partners (particularly when our fantasies do not involve them). In a comprehensive [review](#) of the scholarly literature on sexual fantasy, Harold Leitenberg and Kris Henning write that:

"The essential element of a deliberate sexual fantasy is the ability to control in imagination

exactly what takes place. In fantasy one can imagine anything one likes, however unrealistic, without experiencing embarrassment or rejection or societal and legal restrictions."

The hacking of the Ashley Madison site raises many questions – about the security of private information online, about the moral rights of those subscribing to a “cheating” website, and about the wisdom of posting information about private sexual fantasies online. Is the public revelation of sexual fantasies potentially even more shameful to individuals than exposure as a potential adulterer? If so, the threat of the Ashley Madison hackers is indeed a powerful one.

Disclosure

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/ashley-madison-hackers-threaten-to-expose-sexual-fantasies-44950>