

Ripples from Ashley Madison hack rock local marriages

By [Morgan Watkins](#)

Staff writer

Published: Saturday, September 5, 2015 at 5:22 p.m.

When hackers recently released stolen data from the cheating website AshleyMadison.com, fellow divorce lawyers told longtime Gainesville attorney Jean Westin to expect some new clients.

They were right.

Westin has been approached by three clients so far — two who found their spouse's information in the data that was leaked and one who feared he might be on the list.

The Ashley Madison website, featuring the slogan “Life is short. Have an affair,” bills itself as “the world's leading married dating service for discreet encounters.”

Marriage is based on trust, and this situation throws that relationship into turmoil, Westin said. But she's been doing this long enough that her best advice isn't to rush out and get a divorce.

“Just take a deep breath,” she said. “Analyze. What direction do you want to go?”

In Florida, divorce cases turn on the question of whether



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FILE - A June 10, 2015 file photo shows Ashley Madison's Korean web site on a computer screen in Seoul, South Korea. Contrary to the hacked Ashley Madison cheaters' site that offers anonymous opportunities for affairs, infidelity more often includes somebody a child actually knows: a family friend, a neighbor, a parent from Little League or the PTA, therapists and divorce attorneys said. That means the third party may become a permanent fixture in the lives of children going forward, forcing an entirely new context on young people as they attempt to sort out villains from victims.

the marriage is “irretrievably broken” — something at least one spouse must tell the court is true, she explained.

“Do you trust your spouse?” Westin asked. “Is this something you two can work through?”

Those are questions couples around the U.S. and the world have asked following last month's release of information on millions of user accounts registered with the cheating website.

The hackers, who call themselves the Impact Team, released the information after the website's Toronto-based parent company, Avid Life Media Inc., rejected a demand to take down Ashley Madison and another one of its sites.

Other websites have since popped up that let people search the hacked data for specific email addresses used to create an account on Ashley Madison.

That alone is not enough to prove someone was active on the site since email-address verification isn't required by Ashley Madison to set up an account.

A Madrid-based software company, Tecnilógica, recently developed an online, global map based on the hacked data that shows the number of Ashley Madison users by city. According to Tecnilógica's map, Gainesville had 20,744 Ashley Madison users.

However, according to Gizmodo's analysis of and reporting on the hacked data, it appears many of the female profiles on the cheating site may not have been used by actual women at all, but by robot programs, or bots, that Ashley Madison created to send messages to

male users.

Couples around the world have had to confront at least the possibility that one of them may have been using Ashley Madison to seek out another partner.

One such spouse is Sidney (not her real name), a Gainesville woman who agreed to speak with The Sun anonymously, due to professional and personal concerns.

When Sidney heard of the hack, she searched for and found her husband's email address among the released data.

Sidney previously had learned her husband had an affair while she was pregnant with their child — a discovery, she said, that took the couple two years to work through and that led a counselor to diagnose her with anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Finding her husband's email address listed with Ashley Madison brought back all of those emotions, anxiety included.

“I mean, I'm a wreck, I really am,” she said. “To even visit a website like that and to be curious about it, it's not OK, in my opinion.”

She sought out more leaked data on her husband, learning that he had registered on the website shortly before their child was born but hadn't logged back in since then and didn't have any related credit card transactions. (Although people can register on Ashley Madison for free, they must pay if they want to message someone on the site.)

When she confronted her husband about Ashley Madison, he said he saw a banner advertisement for the

site once and was curious because he was already having an affair and wondered what kind of group he had become a part of by cheating, Sidney said. He claimed he didn't recall setting up a profile and had no intention of talking to anyone on the site.

Her decision might be more clear if her husband had a paid-for account or was having another affair, she said, but this latest discovery does have her considering divorce.

Sister Tina Alfieri, a Catholic nun and Diocesan hermit who also is a certified sexual addiction therapist and a licensed clinical social worker in Florida, emphasized that sexual betrayal is traumatic.

“It's a different kind of trauma for the person who signed up for the site versus the person who found out, what we would classically call the 'unsuspecting partner,’” she said. “But yes, both of them are traumatized, so both of them need help.”

Just because someone signed up for Ashley Madison doesn't mean they're a sex addict, she said. But it does mean there's something amiss in their primary romantic relationship.

“They could've signed up out of curiosity and never used the service,” she said. “They may have only signed up and had one affair and decided, 'This is not for me. Never again.’”

What's important is that people be honest in their relationships, Alfieri stressed.

“If they signed up for the service, they need to have an honest conversation with their romantic partner and acknowledge that there's some kind of unhappiness in the relationship,” she said.

Karen Yochim, a partner in the Law Office of Alba & Yochim, P.A., said she hasn't been approached by any clients whose marriage has been affected by the Ashley Madison hack, but expects that will change after people have had a chance to process what they've learned.

Beyond the personal implications, there could be employment concerns for anyone whose information was released as part of the hack, she said, especially since some jobs have a morality clause.

Government employees, members of the military and public officials whose information was included among the leaked Ashley Madison data already have faced stigmatization about something that otherwise would have remained private, Yochim said.

“We all have our failings as humans,” she said. “Nobody wants everyone to see their dirty laundry, and now it's out there because you were naive. Because you weren't careful.”

University of Florida Professor Michael Fang, who researches Internet privacy issues, said there is no bulletproof security mechanism for any website.

“No matter how good your security mechanism is, there's always a possibility of breaking in,” he said.

This situation differs from other hacks, such as those of store websites where only customers' credit card information may have been leaked, Fang said. The social impact of the Ashley Madison hack is much greater because privacy was breached.

In terms of trying to protect oneself against a hack like this, Fang's advice is simple, but can be hard to follow

consistently.

“Think again before you post anything because whenever you press the button, it becomes public,” he said.

Rachel Ghulamani, a licensed mental health counselor and owner of Private Reflections Counseling in Gainesville, said no one has called her for help regarding the Ashley Madison hack, but anyone who found out their spouse was involved may not be ready to see a counselor yet.

“You're in a panic mode,” she said. The betrayed partner is questioning everything he or she thought they knew.

A counselor can make this process easier, helping navigate the grief that comes with the loss of the bond one had with a partner — a loss that often comes with anxiety and depression, she said. Someone betrayed by their partner often will feel isolated from other people, Ghulamani said. They may feel they have to separate from their spouse because their friends and family are telling them to, even if it's not what they want.

“The expectation is if someone leaves you, you have to leave them. If not, you're weak,” she said. “Even when you watch a movie, the media says, 'Hey, you don't stay with someone if they're cheating on you. That makes you weak.'”

It's OK if someone is ambivalent about what to do, and a counselor can reassure them of that, she said. If they want to repair their relationship, that is an option — one many pursue.

Since discovering her husband created a profile on

Ashley Madison, Sidney said she and her husband are both in individual counseling and she isn't going to rush into a decision about whether to divorce.

Sidney said she learned to cope with and move on from her husband's infidelity because she believed she had all the facts. She ultimately decided the affair resulted from a “perfect storm of factors”: the pregnancy and new baby, obligations on her husband's side, the other woman throwing herself at him, so many different things on both sides. But finding out he was on Ashley Madison created more questions.

Were there other websites? What else does she not know?

“At the same time though, I'm glad I know,” Sidney said. “Maybe not everyone wants to know all the details, but I do because I feel like it's the only way we're ever going to get through this terrible storm. If we do...”

“I'm not angry at the hackers at all,” she said. “I'm really glad the information is out there. As painful as it is...we need to know this.”

*Contact Morgan Watkins at 338-3104 or
morgan.watkins@gainesville.com.*

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