

Affairs of the Heart

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The Ultimate Betrayal

"It was devastating," were the first words she replied when I asked Julie* about her divorce. "Of course the divorce was difficult to handle, but it was actually the deception of the affair that really tore me apart."

After only three years of marriage, Julie learned that her husband John*, had begun having an affair that had been going on "right under her nose" for at least 6 months.

"I was so angry," she explained. "I felt violated, humiliated, and really, really, really stupid for ignoring all the signs. I experienced a full range of emotions when I learned about the affair, but the feeling that was totally foreign to me was the desire to hurt *someone*, or *something*."

"I'm not a violent or angry person by nature," Julie assured me, "but suddenly I was so angry that I lashed out at anyone that came anywhere near me."

"Since John wasn't around," Julie admits "I took my anger out on my friends, my children and my co-workers -- then, when the people who were left behind wouldn't tolerate my anger any longer, I began taking it out on myself."

Julie isn't alone. In a country where almost half of all marriages end in divorce, and an estimated 50% involve an extramarital affair**, it wasn't difficult to find people like Julie to talk with.

Cheryl*, a manager of a local retail store simply stated, "Honestly, I just wanted to kill him."

Gerard*, whom everyone believed to have 'the perfect marriage' for almost 20 years adamantly stated, "The affair was the ultimate betrayal, I'll never trust anyone again."

Of the people interviewed for this article, the comments maintained a common thread of betrayal, loneliness and distrust. Julie admitted, "in a time when I needed people the most, I pushed them all away. As things progressed I started to realize that if I was wrong about trusting my spouse...then who else was I wrong about???? I got to the point where every relationship I had was severely effected because of my inability to put my trust in anybody else."

Julie never dreamed that the list of people she could not trust would ultimately include herself. "Let me tell you," Julie stressed, "This world is impossible to operate in with a total inability to trust your own judgment. When you go through

this type of betrayal, you lose your direction and the results have some pretty severe consequences.”

The Children Of Affairs

Unfortunately, another common thread within the people interviewed for this article, was the ability to tell themselves: “Hey, kids are just kids – right? They’re young, they bounce back, and they don’t really understand everything that’s going on anyway.”

Amazingly, nearly every individual I spoke with admitted that while they were going through the ‘hell’ of the extramarital affair (either *discovering*, or *being discovered*) they found it easier to tell themselves the above statement about their children, despite the fact that they knew it to be completely untrue at the time.

“If I could go back,” Gerard explains, “I would have tried more to help my children cope with the pain that my wife’s affair had on all of us – but, I was so focused on my own pain during the divorce, that it was hard to focus on anyone else”.

Gerard’s son Jason*, now a 21 year old victim of his own parents bitter divorce stated, “Marriage is stupid, you just wind up choosing someone else down the road anyway.”

Not surprisingly, many children are affected just as dramatically as the parents when a divorce ends due to an extramarital affair. The lessons these children learn from their parents’ actions are scary: how to lie, how to deny problems, how to be selfish, and ultimately, how to never trust.

The feeling of betrayal extends to all participants of a divorce due to a cheating spouse. Is there any wonder why children of affairs and divorce have a hard time with future relationships?

Why Do Spouses Cheat?

According to local family counselor Jeff Parziale, Ph.D., “Most people don’t actually want to have an affair. Spouses cheat for a variety of reasons, with a big reason being character issues and perceived boredom in their marriage.”

What seems amazingly contradictory to Dr. Parziale’s statement is a series of well-known surveys conducted between 1990 and 2002 by the *University of Chicago*, which revealed:

- 30% of all adults who say that their marriage is not too happy report having an extramarital affair
- 17% of all adults who say their marriage is pretty happy report an extramarital affair
- and a surprising 10% of all adults who say their marriage is really happy, also admitted to having an affair.

With over 50% of the participants of this survey admitting to extramarital affairs, it's hard to believe that having an affair isn't a conscious decision making process. So, if people don't actually want to have an affair, why do these affairs actually happen?

"Today's marriages take work", Dr. Parziale explains. "There are many factors in today's society that influence the success of a marital relationship. Many people cheat because they did not "intend" not to. To avoid affairs, we must have strong boundaries in place to avoid sharing too many intimate details with friends or coworkers. In other words, cheating for many is more about "not" having a plan on how "not to" cheat."

Dr. Shirley P. Glass, a well-known psychologist who strove to redefine the nature of infidelity prior to her death in October 2003, wrote articles, books and even appeared on television programs such as *Oprah* to examine how the emotional intimacy of the workplace and the Internet had led even people in successful marriages to slip into emotionally intense relationships that could easily lead to affairs.

Dr. Glass said that even if these intense relationships did not lead to sex they were a threat to marriages and part of what she termed "The new crisis of infidelity." The reason, she said, is that the emotional intimacy with the friend gradually, almost invisibly, supplants that with the spouse.

Avoiding The Betrayal

As many of us already know, life is not a fairy tale – for Cinderella, the first kiss was all it took and the relationship then lasted for hundreds of decades – but, for those of us in today's complicated world we're still looking for the magic answer to keeping our marriages alive.

Upon researching this article, it became glaringly obvious that the answer to a successful marriage really isn't as complicated as one might expect, and the answers may just be in looking at what made your marriage happen in the first place – the dating period!

Can you honestly say to yourself, "My list of priorities during the dating period with my spouse is exactly the same today, as it was then"?

Once deemed courting (*idiom: pay court to; To flatter with solicitous overtures in an attempt to obtain something*), today's dating has become similar to a "cat and mouse" chase where once caught, it is soon determined by many that the chase is over.

To maintain a successful and happy marriage, it's important to realize that "dating etiquette" isn't just for dating anymore – it's also for keeping marriages in

bloom. Keeping a marriage positive, having needs met, making your spouse your best friend, having fun together, and keeping an even balance between “talking vs. listening” with your spouse, are all important deterrents to extramarital affairs.

In today’s hectic and advanced world it is more important than ever to keep your marriage fresh and alive. Your spouse should be your best friend, your confidant and the one person that you know you can trust.

When You Suspect An Affair

While you have your own responsibilities in keeping your marriage alive, you cannot control the actions of your spouse. It’s important to realize that if you have knowledge that your spouse is cheating, it is not your fault.

A popular, but inaccurate, notion is that the non-involved spouse should have to change, in order to recapture the involved partner. A common belief is, “if only the wife paid more attention to the husband, or looked more sexy, or had sex more often, then the affair never would have happened.”

If you suspect an affair, but do not have confirmation that an actual affair is taking place, there are several things that must occur. Most importantly, avoid accusations. Inaccurate accusations can destroy a marriage just as quickly as an actual affair can. Instead, talk to your spouse. Try to determine why you suspect him/her of having an affair, and without throwing out accusations, seek to solve some of the “symptoms’ that may have you feeling that there might be something *more* going on.

If your concerns are with working late – address the issue, not your assumptions. If your concerns are with a change in your sex life – talk about it. If you and your spouse are unable to solve the issues together, then seek help from a qualified professional.

“To many people try to manage this situation by themselves,” explains Sharon, a recent survivor of a marriage on the rocks. “The only place you’ll see a list of *The top ten signs that your spouse is cheating you*, is in *Cosmo* – and the list isn’t meant to help you, it’s meant to appeal to our emotions and sell more magazines.”

Sharon suspected her husband of 18 years of infidelity. “All the *Cosmo* signs were there,” she confides, “he was distant, always working late, our friendship seemed non-existent and our sex life was completely dead.”

For months, Sharon and her husband Jim struggled through accusations and arguments that distanced their relationship even further. Finally, they both sought professional help. “Short of a lie detector test, there was no way I could

prove my loyalty to Sharon,” Jim explains “but that didn’t mean that I hadn’t thought about it.”

“It was so tempting to find another friend,” Jim states. “While Sharon was constantly nagging at me about something I was only *thinking* about, I started justifying that if I was going to be accused of doing it, then maybe I should.”

“It wasn’t until I started thinking about *why* I was considering an affair, that I realized how bad it would be for all of us if I actually had one,” Jim commented, “If you seek out someone else because things are going bad at home, then it’s only going to make matters worse”.

Jim and Sharon were one of the fortunate couples that sought professional help before things got out of control. Obviously, the best way to rebuild your marriage is to talk to your partner. Talk to him or her about your needs, wants, feelings, and thoughts. Notably, the best way to prevent extramarital affairs in the first place is precisely the same. The best thing to do when the threat of an affair is added to your marital relationship is to add more positive emotional contributions to your marriage. When all efforts toward communication and positive contributions fail, seek professional advice.

After an affair

An extramarital affair is the most difficult situation that people can effect on a marriage relationship. It eliminates the emotional bond between partners, violates the basic trust each partner has for himself or herself (as well as the other) and it jeopardizes the health and well being of both parties.

Dr. Glass made an impact among marriage therapists in 2003 by saying that “betrayed partners in adulterous affairs often suffered from post-traumatic stress similar to that experienced by combat veterans”.

According to Dr. Parziale, an affair is not only a sexual event -- it is an emotional event. It is usually a consequence of the emotional distance between the married couple. In a rather paradoxical manner, the extramarital affair may also temporarily create more closeness between the couple but will ultimately send the relationship into a terrifying tailspin.

Usually, poor relationships result in people seeking extramarital affairs. Sometimes, the involved partner will justify that the affair is an attempt at “disrupting the status quo” in his or her marriage. If the relationship has drifted into stagnation, lack of emotional contact, habitual criticism and argument, constant conflict, or just plain emotional distance and coolness, then the affair will eventually put the final nail in the coffin.

Probably the most important factor in aiding a marriage to recover from the extramarital affair is to rebuild trust. In most cases, it’s a rare event – and

statistics are low (less than 2%) for marriages to survive the affair. Rebuilding trust usually takes a long time and a lot of patience. It sometimes helps to know that the non-involved spouse will almost always have "relapses" into distrust. There are many exercises for trust rebuilding. Letting down defensive behavior, despite the fear, is only one.

Affairs Lead To Divorce

"Most people don't realize that infidelity is even *biblical* grounds for a divorce," stated one victim of infidelity, "Many people at my church just didn't understand – they hadn't been through it".

It doesn't matter what walk of life you're from; extramarital affairs are an equal-opportunity disaster. "Finding support, and understanding the grieving process can be challenging", Dr. Parziale explains, "for both parties, it is like grieving the death of a loved one."

"For the initiator of the divorce, there are distinct stages such as; alienation, breakup, the love entitlement quest, looking back / mourning, and disentanglement. The letting go process starts early, in the disappointments and disillusion of the working marriage, reaching crisis proportions at breakup, and then still requires attention long after parting of the ways has been accomplished."

"For the non-initiator the stages are: shock, grief / rage, courting the rejecter, distancing, and indifference. The crucial phase is distancing, where the non-initiator begins to restructure his or her new life without the partner".

Both parties involved in a divorce go through a grieving process, although it feels and looks much different. Understanding the process for yourself and for your ex- or soon to be ex-partner is important in the process of healing.

A Final Note

When I began this article on infidelity I wanted to portray the anger and frustration that both spouses admittedly felt when experiencing the cause and effects of an extramarital affair. Amazingly, it was in talking with the victims of infidelity that occurred *years* ago, that the true nature of this indiscretion came into light. The wounds inflicted ten or twenty years ago are spoken so much vehemence, that it appears to the non-informed as if the pain occurred just yesterday. Numerous times I was shocked to learn that the emotional tale I was being told was from a prior marriage, and that the interviewee had actually been happily re-married years ago.

Clearly, infidelity and divorce shatters lives. Some of the wounds and losses take years to heal – some never do. Children, parents, families, siblings, friends, co-workers, neighbors and pastors are all affected by an extramarital affair. Bonds of trust are broken, in many directions, and in many cases never re-built.

If you're considering a "fling" outside your primary relationship, consider well the difficult consequences it will bring. Ask yourself, "Is this sexual encounter really worth all the complications and hassles it will bring into my life?"

*Names have been changed.

*** Divorce statistics vary widely based upon how such figures are determined. I.e.: Do you weigh people getting divorced per year against the number of people who are getting married that same year, or against people who got married when the divorcing people got married, or against everyone who is married, or who ever has been, or do you try to project how many people who are getting married will divorce in the future, disregarding older people who are in more stable marriages? The 50% divorce ratio is a nationally recognized statistic from the US Census Bureau, and although "statistics" for extramarital affairs vary from 25 to 70%, most experts estimate 50%. For more information about surveys and studies, visit www.divorcereform.org **Jackie McAbee is the editor-in-chief of the Good News Newspaper in Tucson, Arizona.***