

# Infidelity: Myths, Facts and Healing

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Infidelity, unlike what most people assume, is neither rare, an exclusively man's doing, nor the likely end of the marriage. Almost a third of all marriages may need to confront and deal with the aftermath of extramarital affairs, and the statistics for women are quickly catching up to those of men. Interestingly, infidelity has become an equal



opportunity affair. Women, men, gay, straight, young and old, all seem to be somehow engaged in affairs. The Internet or online affairs have become extremely prevalent and, some claim, pose one of the biggest threats to marriage. It is very important to realize that marital affairs are common, normal in many societies and survivable. Marriages can get stronger when members of the couple deal constructively with the affair.

Many famous people have publicly dealt with their marital infidelity. These include **presidents**, such as Roosevelt, Kennedy, Clinton and Jefferson, and other **public figures**, such as Prince Charles, Princess Diana, Marion Barry, Gary Hart, Martin Luther King and television evangelist Jim Bakker. **Actors** have long provided endless material for tabloids on affairs and infidelity. Some more known examples are Bill Cosby, Sophia Loren, and Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn's life-long affair. Correspondingly, many **movies** have dealt with affairs, most notably *The Bridges of Madison County*, *Out of Africa*, *The Horse Whisperer*, *Closer* and, of course, *The Graduate*.

The common belief is that affairs are about sex. In fact, affairs are often about self-expression and not always a reflection of a bad marriage. Infidelity is unfaithfulness to a sexual partner in an agreed monogamous relationship.

## Not all affairs are created equal: Types of Affairs:

- 1. Conflict Avoidance:** People who go to any length to avoid any and all marital conflict may resort to affairs.
- 2. Intimacy Avoidance:** "Intimacy avoiders" are reluctant to be intimately close and use the affair to keep themselves at an emotional distance from their spouse.
- 3. Individual (Existential or Developmental):** Mid-life crisis, fear of growing old, the empty nest, depression and a sense of emptiness or a void are factors that can fuel an affair.
- 4. Sexual Addiction:** Sex addicts compulsively display poor impulse control. They use sex over and over again to numb inner pain and/or a sense of emptiness.
- 5. Accidental-Brief Affairs:** This type of one night stand affair "just happens," when a person is in the right (wrong) place at the right time. Curiosity, pity, drunkenness and even politeness may lead to such affairs.
- 6. Philandering:** Some individuals are insecure and constantly need to "score," conquer or receive affirmation about themselves. Narcissistic and impulsive individuals may be especially prone to marital infidelity.
- 7. Retribution:** Sometimes one partner wants to "get back" at the other partner by having an affair. This may be payback for withholding money, love, emotion or any other perceived wrongdoing.

**8. Unsatisfactory Marriage:** This kind of affair is the result of a bad relationship in regard to communication, intimacy, support or sexuality.

**9. Exit Affairs:** "Affair exiters" use the affair as a jumping off point to end a marriage.

**10. Parallel Lives:** These are long-term extramarital relationships, which coincide with the original marital dyad. Affairs of this kind do not necessarily hurt the marriage and many claim may sometimes even support it by increasing the development and sense of well-being of all involved. Examples of these are Spencer Tracy & Katharine Hepburn's life-long affair or Prince Charles & Camilla Parker Bowles' affair. Such extramarital relationships are sometimes known, accepted or tolerated by the spouse and others.

**11. Online:** Online affairs have become extremely prevalent since the inception of the Internet and the propagation of pornography and online dating. Some view online affairs as one of the biggest threats to marriage. With the "Quadruple A engine" of accessibility, affordability, anonymity and addiction, the Internet population seems to be exploring sexuality in ways that are unprecedented.

**12. Consensual Extramarital Sexual Relationships:** Sometimes extramarital relationships are explicitly incorporated into the marriage, as in open marriages, polyamorous, or other arrangements.

### **Myths and Facts:**

#### **There are many misconception and myths about infidelity and affairs.**

**Myth:** An affair inevitably destroys the marriage.

**Fact:** Many marriages survive affairs. Most marriages, where both partners are committed to the marriage and to changing the dynamics that may have supported the affair, emerge stronger from the infidelity crisis.

**Myth:** Infidelity is rare in the animal kingdom.

**Fact:** Only three percent of the world's 4,000 species of mammals are pre-programmed for monogamy. According to many scientists, Homo sapiens are not one of the 3%. Monogamy in the animal kingdom is so rare that those romantic Hallmark cards with images of doves, swans or other types of lovebirds should more accurately feature the flatworm.

**Myth:** Infidelity is rare and abnormal in our, and most other, societies.

**Fact:** Men's infidelity has been recorded in most societies according to anthropologists and archeologists.

**Myth:** Society, as a whole, supports monogamy and fidelity.

**Fact:** Society gives lip service to monogamy/fidelity, but actually supports affairs (as is done with violence) through obsession with sex and role modeling by presidents, celebrities of all sorts, especially actors and actresses, and through advertisements, TV, news media, literature and the movies. The Internet culture openly support and enable affairs. Finding one's first love from high school on Facebook has resulted in many affairs and divorces. Hugely popular Web sites like <http://www.ashleymadison.com> openly facilitate infidelity.

**Myth:** Men initiate almost all affairs.

**Fact:** Infidelity has become an equal opportunity issue in the West, as women are less dependent on men for physical and financial support and, therefore, are willing to risk more by having an affair.

**Myth:** An affair always means there are serious problems in the marriage.

**Fact:** Research has shown that some of those who engage in affairs reported high marital satisfaction. Others have reported that the secret affair has spiced up their marriage and sex life. The groundbreaking research by Dr. Shirley Glass revealed that many men and women who had affairs reported that their marriages were happy.

**Myth:** Infidelity is a sign that sex is missing at home.

**Fact:** Some unfaithful spouses have reported increased marital sex during the period of their affair.

**Myth:** Infidelity always has to do with a bad marriage or a withholding partner.

**Fact:** There are many reasons that people may choose to have an affair and, therefore, many types of affairs. Each affair must be approached and responded to differently.

**Myth:** Full disclosure of *all* the details of the affair to the betrayed spouse is prerequisite to healing.

**Fact:** Giving the uninvolved partner all the X-rated details of the affair can be haunting, traumatizing and can easily fuel obsessions. Sharing general information regarding when, where, with whom, how it started and who else knew, is often sufficient. Some affairs are best kept secret, especially if they are brief and insignificant or may increase the likelihood of domestic violence. Increasing number of spouses prefer not to know about their partner's affair and adopt the "Don't ask-don't tell" approach.

**Myth:** Extramarital affairs are never consensual.

**Fact:** Open marriages used to be popular in the 1970s and are still around. Some couples have reached a consensus regarding extramarital sexual relationships, as is the case in heterosexual marriage when one partner has decided to pursue gay relationships with the consent of the partner.

**Myth:** Concerns about AIDS and other STDs will reduce the frequency of affairs.

**Fact:** Statistics do not support this. Not only did AIDS not reduce infidelity, in fact less than one-half of individuals reporting sex outside the marriage use safe-sex with their primary and secondary sex partners.

**Myth:** Conducting couple therapy is the best approach to dealing with an infidelity crisis.

**Fact:** No one approach is the best with any psychological problem or crisis. Therapists must take into consideration the type of affair, the personalities, ages, culture, length of marriage and many other factors when constructing a treatment plan. Sometimes the combination of individual and couple therapy may be effective. Sometimes therapy, especially with "moralistic" therapists, can be useless or even harmful.

## **Ways to Look at Affairs:**

- 1. Family View:** Infidelity is seen as a "family affair" that must be understood, treated and healed within the marriage rather than being viewed as an individual moral or character failure.
- 2. The Moral-Puritan and Punitive View:** Affairs are rigidly seen as primarily individual, sinful-immoral acts of betrayal that are likely to irreversibly damage marriages, unless the betrayer confesses, repents and atones.
- 3. Individual View:** This view is focused on the betrayer's personality, addiction or phase of life issues.
- 4. Cultural View:** Affairs are not seen as a normal part of certain cultures. Unlike the puritan or the pathological views, this anthropological approach cites the Japanese "love wife" practices, the courtesans of the 16th century in Europe (e.g., the movie *Dangerous Liaisons*) and many other cultures where extramarital sex is accepted.
- 5. Anthropological-Biological View:** Most anthropologists have documented that humans are not biologically designed to be monogamous. Only 3 percent of the world's 4,000 species of mammals are pre-programmed for monogamy. Monogamy in the animal kingdom is so rare that those romantic Hallmark cards with pictures of doves or other types of lovebirds should more accurately feature the flatworm.
- 6. Modern Culture and Media as Promotional Culprit of Infidelity:** Our modern, mass media culture promotes affairs much as violence is promoted. Along with the obsession-fascination with sex there is titillation about affairs. The media sensationalizes affairs such as those of Bill Clinton and Prince Charles. Similarly, movies such as *Bridges of Madison County*, *The Horse Whisperer* and *Prince of Tides* and TV shows, such as *Desperate Housewives*,

normalize affairs. The **Internet** and its booming pornographic businesses and Social Networking sites have contributed not only to the proliferation of online affairs but also to real life affairs.

## **Phases in Dealing & Healing from Affair-Crisis**

*It is important to note that not all affairs or discovery of affairs lead to marital crisis. Married couples in many cultures in the past or present have accepted, tolerated or even incorporated affairs and multiple relationships into the marriage via open conversations or via don't ask, don't tell unspoken agreement.*

### **Phase 1: Discovery and Crisis:**

When a secretive extramarital affair comes to light, it sometimes launches a marital crisis. In response to discovery, the betrayed partner often feels a sense of violation, despair, rage, anger, fear, distrust, depression, jealousy, or may feel relief and validation. The involved spouse's feelings may include shame, remorse, exposure, fear, anger, rage or violence. People must realize at this phase that a. Many of these feelings are normal, b. They will not last forever and c. This is not the time to make major marital decisions.

### **Phase 2: Initial Dealings with the Affair:**

After the exposure of the affair following the discovery or initial confrontation has passed, it is time for the couple to gain perspective and to become more reflective. This is a phase that may involve a lot of blame between the couple, as unresolved hurts come to the surface. Unless the couple comes to terms with the affair and is ready to incorporate it into the marriage, the involved spouse may need to

- a. Cut off all contact with the lover, if possible (minimize it to business contacts only, if it is an office affair),
- b. Make a commitment to future honesty and marital integrity,
- c. Offer a sincere apology,
- d. Apologize repeatedly,
- e. Honestly answer legitimate (only very basic) questions, such as about safe sex and be willing to take AIDS or other STD tests. At this stage the couple tries to understand the individual and couple dynamics that fueled the affair and starts moving away from despair and blame to a realization that the marriage can survive the affair.

**Disclosure:** The involved partner should not disclose X-Rated details about the affair but limit the answers to generally: How did it start? How long did the affair last? How often did the involved spouse meet with the lover? And who else knows about the affair? Giving too many details, as many spouses and psychotherapists insist on, can be haunting in the long run.

### **Phase 3: Beginning Again: Building a Stronger Post-Affair Marriage:**

This stage is about coming to an agreement about the structure of the marriage and about rebuilding the relationship and basing the marriage on mature love, not romantic love. Unlike the falling in love stage, mature love is based on realistic expectations, responsibility, accepting oneself and the other's strengths and weaknesses, knowledge and care of each other and being able to resolve conflicts. Ultimately, the key to healing from infidelity involves, acceptance, letting go of resentment and being able to forgive.

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