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Marriage Partnership

Why Affairs Happen

And what you need to know about prevention and recovery

By Cindy Crosby

As many as 65 percent of men and 55 percent of women will have an extramarital affair by the time they are forty, according to the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*. A *Christianity Today* survey found that 23 percent of the 300 pastors who responded admitted to sexually inappropriate behavior with someone other than their wives while in the ministry.

In Dave Carder's and Duncan Jaenicke's book, *Torn Asunder: Recovering from Extramarital Affairs* (Moody), Carder notes that adultery and divorce rates in the evangelical population are nearly the same as the general population in the United States. Being a Christian does not lessen our chances of having an affair. Through his counseling experiences, however, Carder has found several "shared threads" woven throughout the experiences of married couples who become tangled in an affair. These patterns can serve as warning signals that married couples should be alert to.

Forewarned is forearmed. So *Marriage Partnership* talked to Dave Carder about what to do whether you are contemplating an affair, have experienced an affair, or even if you never expect an affair to impact your own marriage.

What types of affairs do Christians tend to fall into?

All types. There's the "Class One" affair, which is the one-night stand. Then, there is the "Class Two" affair, which is a love relationship that starts as a friendship and grows primarily because of a deficit in the marriage. These often have a powerful emotional connection and involve a shared task or orientation, such as a common ministry or a shared passion. And there is the "Class Three" affair, which involves sexual addiction. Other addictions often go along with it, and many times there is a history of molestation or sexual activity on the part of the person before puberty.

What about the classic "mid-life crisis" people joke about?

We're finding that these types of affairs are happening when men and women are in their late thirties and forties. There's a pattern to them. Usually they happen in a marriage where there is little spousal interaction. Maybe the couple does everything as a family. When the children in the family grow older, the spouses become vulnerable.

Tell us more about emotional affairs. If there's no sex, just the emotional attachment, is it as serious as a sexual affair?

An emotional affair without sex occurs when two parties share their feelings for each other. These affairs are supercharged with emotion. The sound of her voice, the style of his email—they are all loaded. But if you confront them, they'll insist they've done nothing wrong. These secret emotional affairs are powerful influences in the individuals' lives. They often live in a fantasy world, where they imagine what the other party is doing, even while appearing to watch sports on TV or doing some other task.

These individuals rob their marriages of emotional energy. They will save topics of conversation to talk over with the people they are having the emotional affair with, rather than their spouses. They also struggle with feelings of betrayal when they have sex with their spouse. But a lot of these emotional affairs remain non-sexual. They are the hardest affairs to recover from, because there is no guilt.

Should you always tell your spouse if you've had an affair?

Almost always. Remember, marriage is a contract and you broke it. The other party has a right to know. The only exception to this is if there is a history of violence on the part of the spouse: if she has a gun or if he has been abusive when he drinks. In this case, you will need a professional to help you know what to disclose.

The same goes for emotional affairs?

I still think you need to tell. Anything that is a secret for you can be enjoyed in private, and this is what we are trying to do away with. And it is very important that there is absolutely no contact between the two people who have had the emotional affair. It is very difficult to break them off.

What kind of things should married couples be aware of that can lead to an affair?

The fastest growing rate of infidelity is among young married women. Many of them have been molested or are the adult children of divorce. They are looking for marriage to make up a deficit that comes from their childhood. "Intimacy deficits" stem from your family of origin. They may be from a lack of touching or hugging, from a need for a lot of admiration, affirmation, and adoration, or from another vacuum that a spouse wants satisfied. Everybody has deficits.

How does a cheating spouse handle his or her emotions?

He or she is usually overwhelmed with guilt. They are sure that revealing the affair to their spouse will absolutely kill him or her. And they don't want to ruin the image of family they've built.

How can you tell if someone is tempting you to cheat?

If someone tells you things that you know are much better than they really are about yourself, then run. If someone admires you at a level beyond what you know to be true, it can get dangerous. And remember: there are beautiful, bright, charming, or caring women out in the workforce in big numbers who are better at seducing your husband than your

husband is at being able to resist.

What are some other risky situations?

If a couple doesn't share a ministry, one spouse may get into a ministry with another individual and boom! They are in trouble. Or perhaps one spouse has a hobby that they share with someone of the opposite sex. Think about this: What don't I have in my marriage that I have the urgent need to share with someone?

You wrote that the tendency toward extramarital affairs runs in families. Why is this so? We don't know why. Part of the homework I give a couple in counseling for infidelity is to explore what their parents did. Go back and ask them. Not to embarrass them. Ask them how they handled infidelity, if it happened in their marriage. Why did they stay together? What advice do they have? It's amazing how many of the couples I counsel talk to their family members and are shocked at what they find out.

So, is it inevitable, if you have a family where infidelity has occurred, that you will cheat on your partner?

No. But I believe it is inevitable that you will be tempted to have an affair.

How difficult is it to trust your spouse after an affair?

Trust is the big question. You have to forgive your spouse before you can trust him or her again. The repentant spouse must be careful to keep his or her word. No matter how small or unimportant a promise may seem, he or she can't afford to make promises that won't be kept anymore.

What about sex?

First you have to rebuild non-sexual touch. If you don't have good touch, you don't have anything special. It's also important to have the cheating spouse cleared by a physician before you have sex again. There should be no unprotected sex between you until he or she is checked for sexually transmitted diseases.

If there wasn't much sex in the marriage before, it will be difficult to initiate sexual activity after the affair. But in many cases, there is often a lot of sex between the spouses after an affair. Women will think, "I'll show my husband that I'm better than this other woman."

A husband might wonder, "Am I as good as the person whom she was with?" Then, the wronged spouse becomes disgusted again, and anger and withdrawal follow.

Communication is key here. This is a topic you will have to talk about.

How does anger factor into all this?

It's different for everyone. If the wife has an affair, the guy's rage is often never resolved. It just doesn't take much to bring the affair back to his mind. Women seem to be able to let go of their anger more easily.

Anger can play a positive role. I encourage the wives I counsel who have been cheated on to try to find and enlarge pictures of the husband and the other woman, lay the pictures on a bed, then beat the snot out of them. I tell her not to stop beating until she is sobbing and exhausted. If she doesn't get angry about the affair, the anger will eventually leak out all over the relationship in a variety of ways.

Um, that sounds a bit extreme.

When Jesus was in the garden before the crucifixion, he was bloody, teary, messy, and sweaty. He was working through emotional upheaval. Betrayal and abandonment are two of the most painful emotions known to man.

What do you tell the kids?

Children are your first priority here. Make sure you don't injure them for life. Both of you need to sit down together with the child or the children, and both of you need to take responsibility for whatever you have contributed to the experience—not to the affair, necessarily, but for the tension that exists in the family environment.

Does age impact this?

If your children are under eight years old, they've already made up their own story. They are egocentric and will think they have caused the tension. If your children are teenagers, the kids probably already suspect the affair. Tell them the whole story: Dad had a girlfriend; Mom got involved with someone at work. Sharing the truth allows them to process the issue with Mom and Dad instead of guessing and keeps them from expending emotional energy checking on how well Mom and Dad are doing.

That's a lot of honesty.

The issues for your kids are, "Will Mom and Dad make it? Will we stay together as a family?" Do not lie. If you are not sure your marriage can be saved, tell them to pray; tell them you are seeing a counselor. Then, give lots and lots of touching and hugging and stroking and eye contact to your child. They need that reassurance.

Whom else should we tell?

Each person going through recovery from an affair needs a same-sex friend. The key here is that the person is available twenty-four/seven. You need to be able to talk with them anytime. Don't tough it out on your own. If you do, you'll prolong the recovery process, and spend a lot more money on your therapist. Save the money for a vacation.

After an affair, how long can it take for a couple to put their marriage back together?

Think about adolescence, when you put your identity together. It took a long time—maybe six or seven years. This is the same kind of process of shaping your identities, to redo and reform them. Two years is a good point of reference to use. And I don't mean that you will be in crisis for the whole time; the emotions will still be near the surface. Healing takes time, whether you are wounded physically or emotionally.

At what point do you give up on your marriage?

I tell couples to do three things before they throw in the towel, or else they will take all

the anger and betrayal they feel into the next marriage. And another man or woman will not take care of the problems. First, know how and why the affair happened. Life is cyclical. If you had an affair, you will probably go through the same pattern in your next marriage. Second, you have to forgive—for yourself—whether you want to or not. Third, you have to rebuild the trust you had. Even if you divorce, you will still have financial ties, ties with your children, grandchildren, events you will attend together such as weddings and graduations and birthdays, and you have to be able to trust each other. The goal in therapy is to have these three components.

If 20 percent of your marital history before the affair was not what I would rank a "4" or a "5" mutually—with "5" being the highest satisfaction and happiness—you will need a miracle to keep your marriage together. Not every marriage is salvageable after an affair.

If a couple decides to find a therapist or counselor to help, what should they look for? Look for someone who will give you structure and hold you on course. A counselor should give you follow-up work to complete, things to work on every day. You need to find a counselor who will help you work on the marriage, not just the affair. Pastors are actually quite good at providing structure and helping couples work through this.

Cindy Crosby is the author of **Waiting for Morning: Hearing God's Voice in the Darkness** to be published by Baker Book House in June.

How to End an Affair the Right Way

You've done the unthinkable. You've gotten into an affair. Now, how do you end it? In their book, *Surviving an Affair* (Revell), Dr. Willard Harley, Jr., the author of *His Needs, Her Needs: Building an Affair-Proof Marriage* (Revell), and his co-author, Dr. Jennifer Harley Chalmers, suggest the following:

1. Tell your spouse about the affair.
2. The wayward spouse should make a commitment to the betrayed spouse to never see or talk to the lover again.
3. The wayward spouse should write a letter to the lover ending the relationship and send it with the approval of the betrayed spouse.
4. Extraordinary precautions should be taken to guarantee total separation of the wayward spouse and the lover.
5. If the lovers are co-workers, a job change or relocation may be needed.
6. All communication between the wayward spouse and lover should cease. This includes changing your e-mail address, telephone number, cell phone number, and pager numbers.
7. The betrayed spouse should monitor voice mail and regular mail.

8. The betrayed spouse and wayward spouse should give each other a twenty-four-hour daily schedule with locations and telephone numbers to account for their time.

9. Make all future financial decisions jointly, and give each other a complete account of money spent.

10. Spend your leisure time together.

— C.C.

What to Do If You Suspect Your Spouse Is Cheating

If you think your spouse is having an affair, he or she probably is, says Dr. Willard Harley, Jr., the author of *His Needs, Her Needs: Building an Affair-Proof Marriage* (Revell) and the co-author with Dr. Jennifer Harley Chalmers of *Surviving an Affair* (Revell). If you suspect infidelity, Harley suggests asking yourself the following questions:

1. Who is my spouse's best friend? Whom does she admire the most? Whom does he spend time talking to on the phone?

2. Is there an opportunity for a secret second life? Do you have access to your spouse all of the time, or are there portions of the day when he or she is unaccounted for?

3. Are you always completely honest with each other? Or have you told your spouse you don't want to hear the truth if it is upsetting? Honesty is a huge obstacle to having an affair.

4. Have you picked up a sexually transmitted disease that you can't explain?

5. Are you really concerned that your spouse is having an affair, but he or she won't admit it? You may have to take drastic measures. As a last resort, hire a private investigator.

— C.C.

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