

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ABOUT AFFAIRS



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Q. WHY DO SOME PEOPLE HAVE AFFAIRS?

A. People have affairs for a variety of reasons. Affairs serve different purposes for different people.

Some purposes are obvious and some are hidden. Sometimes an affair is a reaction to marital distress or a relationship dysfunction. Often the partner who is vulnerable to having an affair is not getting certain needs met within the marital relationship. Sex might be disappointing and unsatisfying, or emotional needs may not be being met by the spouse. However, this is not universally true.

Some people have affairs for reasons other than faulty marital relationships. In these cases, the "problem" may reside not in the marriage but in the individual partner. For example, certain people may need to prove their attractiveness, desirability or sexual prowess. Other people need may have affairs because they crave constant excitement and romance in

their lives. These people may have an idealized view of marriage, thinking that it should always be romantic and sexually exciting. When the excitement wanes after a period of time, they then turn to other partners in an attempt to get the "old feelings" back.

These are just a few of the many reasons for affairs. **The message here is that although an affair may indicate that something is lacking in a marriage, an affair is not proof in itself that this is always the case.**

Q. WHAT TYPE OF PERSON HAS AFFAIRS?

A. There are as many types of people who have affairs as there are reasons for affairs. In general, however, the dynamics of how people become involved in affairs are gender specific.

Most women first become involved in affairs for emotional reasons and returns. The scenario for most women usually goes like this: A woman meets a man with whom she emotionally "connects." It is usually someone who is attentive and listens to her (more than her husband does). After the emotional bond is formed, the woman may then

eroticize the man and start to find him sexually attractive and then commence the affair.

Men, on the other hand, generally become involved in affairs for sexual reasons, variety and excitement . Being visual creatures, they often are attracted to partners who "look good" to them. Then after having sex, they might form an emotional bond. A colleague of mine puts it this way: "women form relationships from the inside out, while men form relationships from the outside in."

Additionally, a woman who is more likely to have an affair would probably possess some of these personality characteristics: She would have a high sex drive and be comfortable initiating sex. She would be able to keep the secret of her affair from her female confidants. Also, she would be better than other women who don't have affairs at compartmentalizing in her mind and heart, love and sex and various relationships. She also might believe that she is capable of loving more than one person at a time, and in doing so, helping her marriage.

Q. WHAT KINDS OF AFFAIRS DO PEOPLE HAVE?

A. The kind of affair that a person becomes involved in usually

serves certain purposes and reflects certain needs.

A short term affair is often based on convenient opportunity. A "one night stand," when a spouse is out of town, is an example. Alcohol use may also kindle a short term affair. Anger or revenge against a spouse may do the same. Other short term affairs may serve the purpose of "testing the waters" previous to ending a marriage. Life crises or transition points in one's life may also spark these affairs. A not uncommon example is when a husband (who may feel neglected) has an affair during his wife's pregnancy or after the baby's birth.

Long term affairs often serve other functions. According to Masters and Johnson, "Marriage Maintenance" affairs often stabilize marriages that would otherwise break up by filling in what is missing from marriages that don't meet certain needs. "Hedonistic" affairs focus on sex and sensual action. They involve people who don't get their sexual needs met within the marriage and who regard sex as recreation. They rarely lead to heavy emotional entanglements. "Kinky" affairs are similar to "Hedonistic" affairs but additionally are to satisfy unconventional sex needs. "Cathartic" affairs primarily serve the

function of emotional support.. People in these affairs act primarily as sympathetic listeners for each other. "Intimacy reduction" affairs involve people who are uncomfortable being too close. The affair acts as a buffer from too much intimacy in the marriage. "Reactive" affairs are triggered by a person's need to redefine him-or herself during a life change. A "Midlife Crisis" affair is an example of a reactive affair.

Q. WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF AFFAIRS?

A. While I can not endorse affairs because in most instances the downside of this behavior far outweighs any positives, I will say that in very special circumstances affairs can have some benefits.

Sometimes affairs can keep a marriage together by reducing sexual tension, which would then reduce other conflicts. It can also rejuvenate sex and in this way contribute to marital satisfaction. An affair might help a person better appreciate the quality of his or her marriage or spouse by providing a frame of reference for comparison. For a wife who is financially dependent, an affair might help her endure an intolerable situation until

she can be free. Affairs sometimes can be personal growth experiences.

On the downside, the innate deceit of extramarital affairs causes this relationship to be a "timebomb" for many possible negative consequences. If extramarital activities are discovered it often undermines the trust and intimacy in the marriage. In this regard, a "double whammy" in deceit happens when an innocent spouse asks if an affair is happening and it is denied, and then the innocent spouse is also told that she is crazy for thinking these thoughts.

Upon discovering the affair, the innocent spouse often reacts with shock and outrage and feels emotionally victimized because of the violation of the trust bond. These days, innocent spouses can also be physically victimized by being unknowingly exposed to sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV. Affairs can also raise major financial problems in a marriage if money is spent on the other relationship. Affairs can create havoc (and extra guilt) if any of the parties involved come from backgrounds where sex outside of marriage is unthinkable, being religiously and morally wrong.

Women often are most negatively affected if the spouse

becomes emotionally involved in the affair. Emotional involvement is the most threatening to a woman's marital security. **Men, on the other hand, react most negatively to their wives' sexual involvement with extramarital lovers. Because men tend to express their love genitally, it is often hard for them not to focus (and obsess) on the sexual part of their wives' affairs when in fact, the focus of the affair may have been more emotional!**

Q. HOW COMMON ARE AFFAIRS?

A. According to the latest 1994 sex survey, it is not as common as we used to think. The survey states that "80% of women and 65%-85% of men have never cheated on their wives."

Q. CAN A MARRIAGE BE SAVED IF ONE OR THE OTHER PARTNER HAD AN AFFAIR?

A. While the revelation of an affair often precipitates a major crisis for a couple, the marriage can be saved if the couple are both willing to work on building a new relationship. In this case, the couple can use the affair as an opportunity to fully examine and try to correct what was "wrong" in the past. In this way, the affair

can be used as an opportunity for personal growth and development.

In order to save a marriage, couples overall need to have good communication and problem-solving skills. Both need to understand why the affair happened and be able to discuss this together or, if needed, in the presence of a marriage counselor. Each partner needs to be able to express personal feelings of anger, hurt and guilt and also acknowledge these feeling in the other. The partner who had the affair needs to take full responsibility for his or her actions. The innocent spouse needs to be able to consider eventually forgiving, but not necessarily forgetting.

Q. WHAT DO YOU TELL CLIENTS WHO WANT TO GET PAST AN AFFAIR?

A. I tell clients that I do not believe that an affair has to be a reason for ending a marriage. The decision, however, is up to them.

It depends on many issues, some of which were touched on in the previous question. Additionally, it depends on how honest the partners can be with each other, especially when talking about the affair. Trust takes a long time to rebuild, but with a commitment to honesty in the

future it can happen. Finally, the marriage has the best chance of being saved if the partner who had the affair was not emotionally involved (in love) with the other person and if the couple have a good sexual relationship. **Most important is mutual and enduring love within the marriage.**

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