



Nurturing Desire
to love & be loved

by Scott Johansen, PhD & Tamsen Thorpe, PhD



ANATOMY OF AN AFFAIR

In our practice as relationship therapists, we frequently hear cries for greater connection, understanding and harmony from the couples with whom we work. Modern couples are challenged by financial, career, parenting and intimacy issues. In our column we will share the secrets to conquering these challenges so you can enjoy a close relationship with your partner.

Most Americans believe that monogamy and marriage are somewhat synonymous; consequently, they intend to be monogamous when they marry. But daily tabloid stories of torrid affairs are evidence that simply valuing monogamy doesn't prevent extramarital affairs.

Infidelity

Current statistics reveal that about 20% of men and 10% of women engage in sexual infidelity at some point in their life. When you also count emotional and non-sexual affairs, the numbers greatly increase to include 45% of men and 25% of women. That's a lot of infidelity!

What's the problem? Many people reach a point in their intimate relationship when they become attracted to a new acquaintance that seems to be a "better" partner. It's kind of a "the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence" approach to relationships.

Affairs may or may not involve emotional or sexual aspects. All affairs, however, involve a betrayal of relationship standards dealing with emotional or physical exclusivity or monogamy. Moreover, infidelity does not happen only in troubled marriages; it can also happen in sexually functional relationships and in traditional, non-traditional and religious couples.

Easy Access

Greater access to willing partners leads to higher risk. The latest trend in infidelity involves married partners seeking affairs on Internet dating sites. The appeal of these websites to married partners is that they enable discreet affairs. One such site

exclusively for married partners boasts over four million members, suggesting that this is a popular service with a great deal of staying power. The typical male member of this site is a professional 30 to 40 year-old who has been married seven or more years; he senses a lack of physical intimacy in his marriage. Female members of the same web site can be categorized as either the "desperate housewife," the "mistress," or the "newlywed".

The desperate housewife usually feels emotionally and physically abandoned and yearns for an intimate relationship that may be a bridge to a more fulfilling committed relationship. In contrast to the desperate housewife, the mistress wants to be wined and dined with no long-term commitment. Lastly, an emerging member segment consists of newlywed women who are disappointed that marriage didn't live up to their expectations. This is consistent with research indicating a higher risk for an affair in the first two years of marriage than after 20 years of marriage. Further, this trend may be a reflection of the current casual hookup culture of high school and college-age youth. This group characterizes relationships called "friends with privileges" where mutually gratifying sexual contact occurs between non-romantic friends. For some people, it may be easier to move on to a superficial sexual relationship than to stay engaged in a real one.

On-line relationships especially lend themselves to emotional infidelity. It's easy for people to find emotional solace in an Internet chat room. Unfortunately, those seeking intimacy online are frequently avoiding conflict in their current relationship and forming impressions based on idealistic self-presentations. This risky combination explains why on-line infidelity frequently leads to actual sexual affairs.





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Types of Affairs

According to McCarthy and McCarthy in *Getting It Right the First Time: Creating a Healthy Marriage*, there are three major types of affairs.

The high opportunity/little involvement affair typically involves men who are looking for an easy exit scenario. Most of these affairs are opportunistic, not planned.

Second is the compartmentalized ongoing affair. This type of relationship involves some emotional connection, but it does not compete with a marriage. Lending credibility to the old adage that affairs are easier to get into than out of, these types of affairs often become more emotionally involved and complicated than the parties originally intended.

Last is the comparison affair, posing the greatest threat to a marriage because unmet sexual and/or emotional needs are satisfied by the affair. Perhaps even more threatening for men, this type of affair is most common for women.

Preventing Affairs

The best strategy for a monogamous marriage is to prevent affairs in the first place. Here are three quick tips.

- In some relationships, one partner believes that fidelity is critical to the relationship, while the other may disagree. What is your position on fidelity in your relationship? Rather than assuming that your partner understands where you stand, openly discuss the importance of fidelity in your relationship.
- Secrecy and impulsiveness facilitate affairs. Once you have discussed the issues of fidelity and monogamy with your partner, agree to speak to your partner before acting out a desire if the appeal of an affair is looming.
- Continued cover-ups, lies, and secrets add insult to injury. If you begin down the slippery slope of betrayal, catch yourself early and discuss it with your partner within 24 hours. Having this "24-hour rule" to disclose your acting on temptations, however small, (a lunch or phone call that feels inappropriate) may prevent further damage.

Responding well to infidelity requires that each partner become aware of why the damaged relationship is important. Some couples find common ground in their shared history, love for their children, or even the practical legal, financial, and social considerations involved in ending a relationship. Whatever the source of motivation, it is most critical that the couple resolve to reconnect on an emotional level.

The Aftermath of the Affair

Repairing the relationship after an affair involves taking an honest look at the positive and negative qualities of the relationship. Both partners need to share openly and honestly about their feelings about the state of the relationship in order to move forward as they form a new relationship; also realizing that the old relationship was defective and destined for failure. A neutral religious leader or marriage therapist with specialized training in working with couples post-affairs, can help couples move beyond the hard feelings of the past. During this time, it is important for the couple to share their commitments to each other explicitly and to tell their partner clearly and in no uncertain terms of their intent to be faithful.

Contrary to what many believe, affairs don't have to destroy marriages. According to nationally known marital therapist and author Barry McCarthy of American University, about four out of five couples can repair their relationship after an affair by accessing the services of a qualified relationship therapist. Using an affair as an opportunity to reconsider the strengths in their relationship will help them transition the experience of infidelity from one of pain and despair to one of hope and satisfaction.

The purpose of this column is to provide you with strategies to "nurture the desire" in your intimate relationship. Our hope is that the information in this column will deepen the love in your relationship.

If you have any questions about this topic or would like to schedule a consultation, contact Tamsen Thorpe, PhD, (licensed psychologist) or Scott Johansen, PhD (relationship mediator) at 973-425-8868. or www.directions-clc.com.

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