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Ask the Experts: 7 Insights into Affairs and Their Impact on the Divorce Process

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As mental health and legal professionals, we know how difficult it can be to assist families negotiating the divorce process. One of the more inflammatory factors that we encounter, only too frequently, is when there has been an extra-marital affair. Even if the parties have been unhappily married and equally yoked in their misery, the occurrence of an affair is often explosive. It is helpful to understand the dynamics of affairs and the negative consequences that may ensue. Providing early psychoeducation and effective interventions can be crucial to the outcome of these complex matters. Particularly, shifting the self-focus perspectives of these adults onto the best interest of their children, can make a critical difference.

1. **Trends:** Although there is not a lot of research on the impact affairs have on families, we do know that the incidence is greater, and more women are having affairs; particularly younger women. A study conducted in 2012, found that 23% of men and 14% of women engaged in extra-marital affairs. More recently, statistics show that men and women are on par until their 30's after which men outpace women. Approximately 11-21% of people with children engage in affairs. In a study of divorced individuals who had participated in a premarital course prior to marriage, a high percentage (60%) of individuals cited infidelity as a major reason for divorce.

2. **Types of Affairs:** There are many types of affairs and underlying dynamics that drive infidelity. Certainly, in the past 30 years, there has been a liberalization in sexual mores, advances in contraception, and the surge in the use of social media platforms. There is also a greater emphasis on the self and emotional satisfaction. Affairs may be primarily sexual, emotional, or both; the latter obviously the greatest threat to a marriage. The reason for affairs can run the gamut, including exit affairs, lack of intimacy or emotional connection, mid-life crisis, or sexual addiction. There are also numerous psychopathologies, individual deficits, and personality issues that drive these.

3. Challenges to the Divorce Process: The discovery of an affair adds gasoline to the fire of the divorce process. In this context, there are two emotionally polarized individuals in the room, who are in different places. Negotiations and decision-making become challenging at best. The injured party's obsession over the details of the affair prevents them from focusing, particularly on the needs of their children. The offending parent often is riding the continued high of the new love interest, while lacking empathy to the spouse's distress.

4. Impact on Adults: The unique characteristics of the affair may add complexity and fuel the conflict in the divorce and future co-parenting. These include, but are not limited to, multiple affairs, those of longer duration, when the affair partner has been previously known, whether the children have become involved, or there is a STD or pregnancy. The typical reactions to divorce such as rejection, abandonment, loss, betrayal, anger, and humiliation are only magnified. The depth of these emotions can also lead to PTSD, severe depression, substance abuse, and emotional dysregulation. As professionals, we need to be alert to the increased potential for domestic violence, and suicidal ideation. While therapy may be of assistance in these matters, some may require trauma focused interventions.

5. Potential Effects on Children: There is a paucity of research on the impact of infidelity on children, but we do know it can vary according to age, gender and cultural factors. It can cause children to feel guilt, depression, anxiety, fear, shock, and anger. It can also detrimentally effect parent-child relationships to the extreme of alignments and parent-child contact problems. Children may overhear conversations among parents and extended family. An injured parent often discloses the existence of an affair to the child in a moment of distress or anger. Early intervention is crucial for children, as is educating parents regarding the detrimental effects of their behavior. Specifically, parents need to understand the negative consequences of alignments, premature introduction to the affair partner, and multiple changes/losses occurring simultaneously. Younger children may blame themselves for the tension and feel abandoned by their parents' lesser emotional availability. Adolescents may blame one of the parents, may become parentified, or it may affect how they cope with their own emerging sexuality and future adult relationships.

6. Impact on Parent-Child Relationships: Overall, it is an overwhelming task for children to remain out of the conflict and maintain neutrality when there is an affair. Adolescents in particular, have a difficult time with this. They often lose respect for a parent, or align with one parent while rejecting the other parent. Indeed, they actually can reject either parent. Adolescents tend to have a significant reaction if the affair partner is known to them, or there is a child expected or born of this relationship. In families where there are diffused boundaries, a parent-child enmeshment may ensue. In families with rigid boundaries, children may feel disengaged or isolated. Family therapy or a family intensive intervention is often recommended to address these problematic relationships.

7. Softening the Repercussions for the Children: A common question is “What, if anything, to tell the children?” As a general rule, it is best that children are not made aware of the existence of affairs, and that their parents keep this information to themselves. Characterizing either parent as a “bad guy” or “victim” does not benefit them in any way. However, there are many occasions wherein children are aware. In these situations, it is important to listen to their feelings and thoughts without sharing adult feelings, perspectives, or details. They should never be asked to keep secrets or be a parent’s confidant. Characterizing the precipitant for divorce as a “loss of fit on the part of the adults” is far less damaging, and something that best protects the child’s relationships with each parent. Children need to receive the message that it is not something they can control or repair. It is not “their divorce.”



Marcy Pasternak, PhD Dr. Marcy Pasternak is a Clinical and Forensic psychologist who practices in New Jersey. She obtained her doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology at Duke University. While her practice serves individuals of all ages in both the clinical and forensic arena, her special interests include marital and family therapy, divorce therapy, forensic evaluations concerning custody and parenting time, removal, refuse/resist dynamics, grandparent visitation, risk assessment, and personal injury. She often serves as a parenting coordinator, parenting coach, and is also an accredited divorce mediator, conducting both divorce mediation and therapeutic mediation. She conducts multi-day Intensive Family Interventions through "Building Family Resilience", an outgrowth of her practice. These interventions are for families in which a child resists contact with a parent.

Dr. Pasternak has served as a psychological expert in numerous counties in New Jersey. She was a Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at New Jersey Medical School, UMDNJ, now voluntary faculty. She is the past President of the NJ chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts and has given numerous workshops and presentations to the mental health and legal communities in New Jersey and nationally.



Sharon Ryan Montgomery, PsyD, is a licensed psychologist in New Jersey. Dr. Montgomery completed her doctorate in psychology from Rutgers University in 1982. Her areas of expertise are in Clinical and Forensic Psychology. Dr. Montgomery has served as an expert in over 2000 custody disputes, and has also conducted evaluations in criminal matters, personal injury, marital tort cases, and testified in court on numerous occasions. She also serves as an Individual, Couples, Family and Reconciliation Therapist; as well as Parenting Coordinator, Mediator, Divorce Coach and supervises other

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Dr. Montgomery is Past President of the New Jersey Psychological Association and the New Jersey Chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, Human Services Association of Morris County, and the Morris County Psychological Association.



Tamsen Thorpe, PhD is a Licensed Psychologist in private practice since 1997 and prior working in the areas of research at UCLA and in Organizational Psychology in NYC Corporations. Dr. Thorpe counsels adults, children, couples and families in transition. In therapy, she assists couples rekindle their relationship using the Gottman Method and EFT Couples therapy techniques, addressing such challenges as affairs, parenting, communication, and conflict. She also conducts forensic evaluations in the area of Family Law and interventions such as: divorce coaching, parent coordination, coparent counseling, and reunification/family integration counseling. Lastly, she is on the Board of Directors for NJ's local AFCC Chapter and has spoken recently on such topics as Parent-Child Contact Problems and Affairs at the AFCC national conferences, as well as many other venues.