

Infidelity & Affairs: Myths, Facts & Ways to Respond

By Ofer Zur, Ph.D., Director, [Zur Institute, Inc.](#)



Not every infidelity is a symptom of a problem in a relationship. Sometimes it has to do with other longings that are much more existential. Sometimes you go elsewhere not because you are not liking the one you are with; you are not liking the person you have become.....Esther Perel, author of *Mating in Captivity*

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. In the West, the stigma around divorce is disappearing and the only stigma left is now around infidelity. 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 they 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 I: 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 II: 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 III: 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 IV: 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 V: 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 VI: 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 VII: 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 VIII: 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 IX: 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 X: 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 XI: 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 XII: 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 and attended within the marital relationships rather than being viewed as an individual moral or character failure.

2. Cultural View: Affairs are not seen as a normal part of certain cultures, such as the US. Unlike the puritan or the pathological views of affairs, 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, expected and viewed as normal.

3. The Moral-Puritan and Punitive View: Affairs are rigidly and unrealistically seen as individual, sinful, immoral, godless acts of betrayal that are likely to cause irreversibly damage to marriages unless the betrayer confesses, repents, and atones.

4. Individual View: This view is focused on the personality, addiction, or phase of life issues of the one who had the affair.

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.

Ways of Responding or Handling an Affair

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, open marriage, "don't ask, don't tell" unspoken or spoken agreement, or other consensual agreements.

1. Unlike many cultures past and present, American or Western ways often involved a break of the marriage or **divorce** soon after the affair comes to light. In some ways, it is shocking to see how sometimes a single affair can break up a long-term good marriage, can cause an ugly divorce, and hurt children who are exposed to a nasty divorce or are forced to choose between mom or dad.
2. Some couples choose the '**Don't ask, don't tell**' approach to affairs. The 'Don't ask, don't tell' can be explicit or implicit, openly acknowledged or unacknowledged.
3. Some couples choose to stay in or re-instate a **monogamous marriage** and are willing to 'work' on the marriage (in psychotherapy or on their own) to achieve such a goal. This often involves the following 3 phases:

Phase 1: Discovery and Crisis: When a secretive extramarital affair comes to light in a monogamous marriage, it sometimes launches a marital crisis. The 'betrayed' partner often feels anger, fear, betrayal, depression, jealousy, etc. The involved spouse's feelings may include shame, remorse, fear, etc. Both must realize that many of these feelings are normal, hopefully will not last forever, and that this is not the time to make major marital decisions.

Phase 2: Initial Dealings with the Affair: This phase may involve a lot of blame between the couple, as unresolved issues may come to the surface. The involved spouse may need to cut off all contact with the lover if possible (minimize it if it is an office affair), make a commitment to future fidelity, offer a sincere apology, and 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. **[Note on disclosure:** The involved partner should not disclose x-rated details about the affair but limit the answers to generally how it started, how often, and who else knows about the affair. Giving too many details, as many spouses and psychotherapists mistakenly insist on, can be haunting and damaging in the long run.]

Phase 3: Beginning Again: Building a Stronger Post-Affair Marriage: This stage is about jump-starting the monogamous marriage, rebuilding trust, and letting go of resentments.

4. Some couples agree to engage in some form of consensual non-monogamy following an affair, such as **open marriage**. Open marriage is a consensual arrangement of couples who conduct extramarital relationships emphasizing sexual gratification and recreational friendships but with a primary commitment to the original marriage.
5. Some couples decide on a **polyamorous** arrangement, which is another form of consensual non-monogamy. Polyamorous is the practice of, or desire for, intimate relationships involving more than two people, with the knowledge and consent of everyone involved. Some have called this kind of marriage as "consensual, ethical, and responsible non-monogamy".