

Title: Our Cheating Hearts: Understanding Marital Infidelity

Author: Peggy Anne Bolcoa

Date: Unknown

"Sex is hardly ever just about sex."

Shirley MacLaine

It has been estimated conservatively that one-third of all marriages will experience marital infidelity. Given our very high divorce rates, it often seems that the incidence of infidelity may be even higher than these estimates.

Many of us wonder, especially as time goes by in our relationships, what it would be like to have an affair. How would it feel if my partner had an affair? Can I continue to stand up to the competition out there? I hear about it happening so often that I have to believe it could happen to me.

Normal flirting, or at least an interest in other potential sexual partners, would not be confused with marital infidelity. Indeed one mark of a sexually healthy individual is that he or she can have attractions to other people, and if the marital relationship is also healthy the two partners can verbally share and even laugh about their attractions, at least to a degree.

Another mark of the healthy person is the ability to recognize and maintain appropriate boundaries. In other words, one realizes that it is normally not appropriate within a committed relationship to take action on one's attractions. If one is committed to providing a safe, trusting, respectful and nurturing environment for one's partner, it is not appropriate to engage in an extramarital affair.

Marital infidelity is usually a signal that there are difficulties within the relationship, despite the fact that the marriage may be quite healthy in most respects. We often fail to recognize when a marriage is having problems. It is easier sometimes to deny that there are difficulties and to go about living out the myth that everything is perfect between the two partners. But every marriage changes, just as the partners change as they live out their lives and it takes work to keep any marriage going at the level of open, honest communication.

When we lose track of what is really going on in our relationship, how we approach our own lives and how we feel about our partner, we may be opening the door to marital infidelity. Like drug or alcohol abuse, an extramarital affair is usually a signal that there is trouble in a relationship, and it can then lead to more problems between the partners.

It is not just the act of adultery that is most damaging to a relationship. Rather it is the secrecy associated with the infidelity, which ultimately undermines an otherwise healthy marriage. This secrecy leads to distance between the two partners, and with this distance comes a blow to the trust; the sense of sharing, and the open communication which may have characterized the initial stages of the relationship.

A marriage marked by infidelity is not necessarily doomed, and it can serve as the start of a much healthier relationship. The first step is to admit responsibility. The person who had the affair needs to communicate openly, completely, and truthfully, and to apologize deeply for his or her actions. This person has to acknowledge that a mistake has been made and to commit oneself to understanding what led up to the infidelity.

Second, the betrayed partner needs to express his or her feelings about the affair, and this may include anger, distrust, hurt, fear, or any other emotion brought up by the event. Third, both partners should acknowledge their own responsibilities in the events that led to problems in the

relationship, realizing that both have acted equally in bringing the relationship to a stage in which infidelity became possible. If the emphasis is on blaming only one partner, the relationship has little chance to succeed in the future. The betrayed partner needs to assume responsibility in bringing the relationship to a point where there can be a future. If this person cannot get over feelings of hurt and anger, there may be a tendency to continue to blame and punish the one who committed the infidelity. Finally, both partners need to identify the causes of their unhappiness and to agree on methods of rebuilding the marriage so that both can feel fulfilled in the future.

If these goals can be accomplished, an extramarital affair can serve as the start of a new relationship built on commitment, trust, and a more mature love.

MYTHS ABOUT MARITAL INFIDELITY

1. An extramarital affair can rekindle a lifeless marriage. Not true. If the marriage is lifeless, this can often serve as the death knell to the marriage. Infidelity can perhaps make one or both partners feel very much alive again, but not within the bounds of the committed relationship. If the partners can engage in healthy communication, however, any crisis in a marriage can put the relationship back on a healthy track.
2. Infidelity has to lead to divorce. Not true. If it can be talked through in an atmosphere of love and acceptance, the resolution of the infidelity can lead to a stronger marriage.
3. Infidelity is normal. Not true. Some people believe that because of today's longer life spans, it is appropriate to marry several times within one's lifetime. However, what is normal and healthy is to have good communication within our relationships and to provide a sense of protection, comfort, and security for our partner. Infidelity leads to just the opposite.
4. Men are more likely than women to have an extramarital affair. This may be only somewhat true. One study has found that 26% of men and 21% of women have engaged in affairs outside of their marriages. The figures are slightly higher for those who cohabit (33% for men and 30% for women). What is important here is that a substantial proportion of women also engage in infidelity.
5. Only troubled marriages will experience infidelity. Not true. Infidelity can be found in marriages, which are healthy in most respects. Despite a healthy marriage, one of the partners can slip. We don't always maintain perfect boundaries in our lives. As one astute observer of human behavior has noted: To err is human - but it feels divine. Mae West.

THIS ARTICLE WAS CONTRIBUTED BY PEGGY ANNE BOLCOA, MFCC. PEGGY IS A LICENSED INDIVIDUAL, MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST. HER OFFICE IS IN COSTA MESA, CA. PEGGY MAY BE REACHED AT 714-436-1800.