

The Emotional Cost of Infidelity; Family therapists examine the psychological roots of extramarital affairs [FINAL Edition]

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Nearly four years ago Linda Shafer, divorced and living alone with her dog in Oklahoma City, logged onto her computer after a long day of social work and entered the world of Internet chat rooms. One man sparked her interest. They started a private conversation.

"This wasn't the usual 'how much do you weigh' or 'what color is your hair?' " says Shafer, a social worker with the federal government. "This was different."

As it turned out, he lived close by. After a few weeks of intense, personal dialogue, he suggested they meet for lunch. He was married with children.

"This was the stupid part," says Shafer, her voice soft, kind, a voice that troubled families--her clients--can trust. "I thought it would be harmless just to meet a married man for lunch. Well, I met him."

Shafer didn't know it at the time, but she had already entered stage three of an extramarital affair that would last 3 1/2 years, bringing her moments of bliss, hours of sorrow.

Nearly all affairs--yes, even yours--follow very specific patterns. They generally fall into four stages, according to several family researchers. Stage One: You develop a close emotional bond. This is the talking stage. For Shafer, it occurred on the Internet. For others, it happens at work or in the neighborhood. You get to know each other, about each other. There's a spark.

Stage Two: You keep it a secret. You don't tell your spouse or your friends that you are attracted emotionally to this person. "You know you're in deep when you decide to keep the relationship secret," says Florida psychologist Debbie Layton-Tholl. "Fantasy and secrets are very powerful. They fuel the fire."

Stage Three: You have lunch, play tennis. This is the dating phase, though you might not know it. You start seeing each other, doing things together. You might tell yourself this is just a colleague, just a friend.

Stage Four: Well. You know.

At that point you are engaged in an intense sexual and emotional liaison. Sometimes extramarital affairs lead to new marriages. Other times, they are roller-coaster relationships that last only months, or a few years. And then there are affairs that become lifelong relationships. Think of CBS correspondent Charles Kuralt, whose 30- year

romance was exposed posthumously, shocking fans of his television program, "Sunday Morning."

According to researchers and eyewitnesses, thousands of people have life-changing affairs and use nearly identical language to describe the passion, betrayal and pain associated with them. "No one ever made me feel like that before." "I wanted to kill myself." "If I had to choose one person to live with me on a deserted island, it would be him." Or "her."

Family therapists and affair survivors--or casualties, depending on how the affair turns out--urge people to acknowledge the prevalence of affairs and to start talking openly about them. Only such honesty, they believe, will help illuminate the psychodynamics of these relationships and help people understand--and perhaps avoid--the pain that they can cause.

"Extramarital affairs are one of the most taboo subjects in our culture," says Janis Abrahms Spring, author of "After the Affair" (HarperCollins, 1997) and a supervisor at Yale University. They are "so extraordinarily traumatizing," she says. "And yet we talk about them only when we are making jokes."

The Fall

"We just slide into it," explains Baltimore psychologist Shirley Glass, who specializes in couples and extramarital affairs. "Often, the attraction begins at work. Women have become more involved in previously male-dominated professions. They work closely, seeing each other at their best. A friendship develops. If you are not careful, the friendship becomes too intimate and eventually sexualized. The chemistry intensifies. Sparks fly."

Maybe you even fall in love.

Stage One is the innocent prelude during which the emotional connection is formed. A former police officer in upstate New York who had an eight-month affair says he didn't see it coming. It was early in his marriage, before he became a police officer, and he was working evenings, managing a fast-food restaurant.

"One of the workers and I just developed this friendship," he says in a telephone interview, the sounds of his two kids, chattering in the background. He moves to a different phone and explains: "It wasn't about hopping into bed with someone. We talked for four months before anything sexual happened."

But inevitably, the relationship moved through the stages. One night after closing, he and the woman were talking passionately about personal issues, as usual. She asked him to help her fix a light in the men's bathroom. "I was in there, and suddenly the door opened and she came in and closed the door and kissed me," he says. "I kissed her back."

Meanwhile, he kept the relationship a secret. His wife eventually found out about it after finding a note in his pants pocket. Standard movie-script fare.

It's a common plot, a cliché scenario played out in movies, novels and government hallways. Fumbled kisses. Groping in Nissan Altimas. Steamy Comfort Inns. Shafer, the social worker, met her lover in a hotel room for three years. "I'm in my mid forties, and we would make out in the car like we were 16," she says. "There's a certain high to that."

But there is the larger human element that muddies up the script, and the very real and devastating pain that often follows. Even when the affair marks the beginning of a new, healthier, long-term relationship, it comes at a price. Someone, somewhere in an extramarital affair, always loses.

Yet affairs often feel like love. "You get very close emotionally and physically very quickly, but it's a fake closeness," says Shafer. "For him, it was out of sight, out of mind. For me, the day after was always the hardest."

Often these relationships are stormy. Shafer broke off the relationship several times. One breakup lasted seven months. The final breakup came more than three years after she connected with him on the Internet. She reached the point where he disgusted her. The final straw came one day after he had taken a shower. "He said, 'I think I still smell like you,' and it just made me sick to my stomach," she recalls. "That was it. I had had it." He left, and that was the last time she saw him.

Shafer says the deception hurt the most. "The relationship can never go anywhere. You're making a banquet out of crumbs." She discounted the possibility that the affair would lead to marriage. "Even if a person gets divorced, the new relationship is still based on a lie," she says.

"I knew what I was getting into," she continues. "But I didn't get out of it without getting hurt." Near the end, it was clear to her that he was seeing someone new, another affair. "At times I feel like I still love him, but what do I love?"

The Allure of the Secret

Statistics on the frequency of affairs don't add up. People lie, even in anonymous polls. Also, general polls are often not reliable: an 18-year-old who says he's never had an affair isn't saying much.

The percentage of those who say they have had affairs ranges from 25 percent to 75 percent of all males and 15 percent to 60 percent of women. Psychologist Layton-Tholl, who specializes in Internet research and has interviewed 3,600 people who have had affairs, says the current acceptable statistic is roughly half of all men and women--including the persons victimized by the deception--get involved in extramarital affairs. Abrahms Spring, who has worked with couples for more than 25 years, says affairs affect one of every 2.7 couples.

But enough math. The point is, most people will have some exposure to infidelity. Maybe it will be you, your spouse, a sibling, a friend, a parent (the dreaded box of love letters in the attic) or someone admired from afar, like, say, Kuralt. His long-term relationship came to light after his death when the "other woman" pressed her claim for the Montana house she had shared with him for so many years. They had spent Christmases together, gone on vacation together.

Kuralt is hardly the only one. Famous names recently in the media: Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Marion Barry, Thomas Jefferson, Prince Charles, French President Francois Mitterand (whose mistress stood beside his wife at his funeral), Gary Hart, Frank Gifford, Bill Cosby, poet James Dickey, writer John Cheever, Martin Luther King, television evangelist Jim Bakker (whatever happened to Tammy?) and Rep. Bob Livingston.

What is it about affairs? What is it about passion--defined literally as "suffering"? Why do people risk everything for that stolen kiss, sweaty palms, rapid heart rate? Why do writers dramatize the suffering in popular mythology? Remember "Bridges of Madison County," "The English Patient," "Gone With the Wind," and the this year's Academy Award winner for Best Picture, "Shakespeare In Love."

"It's a drug," says Shafer of Oklahoma. "It's a fix. You can't wait until the next time. It's very addicting. You feel you can't live without it."

Florida researcher Layton-Tholl focuses specifically on the allure of secret relationships. People who keep them report far greater arousal, passion and obsession than with nonsecret relationships. (Not unlike the very early days of perfectly legitimate relationships, before you tell your friends and family that you are "in love.")

The signs and symptoms are familiar. People "in love" fantasize, pine, obsess. They lose sleep and weight. "I've talked to men who 15 years after the affair still wonder what she's doing," says Layton- Tholl.

How interesting that they reach such romantic heights only out of context from their daily lives. But is it love?

In "After the Affair," Abrahms Spring draws distinctions between romantic love and mature love. "Romantic love is an intense but unwarranted attachment that you, the unfaithful partner, may feel toward your lover," she explains. You think the love must be real because the chemistry between you is so explosive. You are willing to sacrifice so much for this passion. "The blind spot behind this feeling--what you fail to see," she writes, "is that your so-called grand passion may have more to do with your unmet childhood needs than with who this other person really is."

Love also experiences changes on a physiological level. In the throes of romantic love, people experience a high from natural amphetamine-like chemicals such as dopamine and

norepinephrine. "In the next stage of love," she writes, "the brain releases endorphines-- natural painkillers that soothe and create a sense of security and calm."

On the cognitive side, a perceptual distortion takes place. "You idealize the other person, assigning him or her more positive attributes than any one person could actually possess," continues Abrahms Spring. "At the same time, you're likely to paint your partner in equally distorted, but negative terms, as a foil for your lover."

Personal Trauma

Falling in love is obviously not confined to infidelity. Most contemporary marriages start out with romantic love. But, therapists say, couples have to grow up and understand that "feelings of love are neither steady nor constant but travel in natural cycles," as Abrahms Spring puts it. "If your relationship doesn't live up to your ideas about love, the problem may be not with your relationship but with your ideas," she writes.

Falling out of love with a spouse--and in love with someone else often rekindles that early experience of romantic love. It's why lovers say "He (or she) made me feel young again."

But sooner or later, lovers in an extramarital affair have to confront the dynamic nature of their relationship and move on to a deeper bond. Or sever the connection.

Just why people have affairs has no single answer. Each case is different. Researchers point to a combination of issues in the individual and in the marriage. Personal issues run the gamut of pop psychology from low self-esteem to midlife crises in which people question everything at work and at home.

Marital problems may stem from getting married very young or having a job that takes a spouse away from home--emotionally as well as physically.

With so many different factors, researchers resist a cookie-cutter formula to explain infidelity. Nor do they use such labels as "bad marriage" or "weakness of character."

"It's a mistake to think that only people with personal weaknesses have affairs," explains Peggy Vaughan, co-author with her psychologist husband of six books on extramarital affairs, including "The Monogamy Myth" (Newmarket Press, 1998) and "Beyond Affairs" (out of print), in which the Vaughans detail the husband's 17 affairs over a period of seven years and describe how they rebuilt their marriage. "It's far more complicated than that," she says.

Another factor involves societal attitudes not only about celebrities who have affairs but also about sex. "As a society, we give a lot of lip service to--but actually undermine-- monogamy," says Vaughan. "We learn at a very early age to associate sex with deception and secrecy. By not talking to our teens about sex, for example, we show them to keep it

secret," she says. That sets up an expectation, she argues, that sexual fulfillment can only be attained in secret relationships.

Secrecy, many researchers maintain, is the enemy of monogamy. Abrahms Spring notes how difficult it is even for patients to talk about infidelity and how many of them try to hide affairs in the initial phase of therapy.

"My focus is extramarital affairs. Obviously, that's why they come to me," she says, laughing softly at the irony. "But it takes them several sessions before they can speak of it."

The Aftermath

The former police officer and his wife tried to repair the marriage, had another baby. A few years later, the wife had a short affair with someone she met on the Internet, then another. Eventually she left him.

"I cried for hours on the couch. I couldn't move," he says. "My wife never recovered from my affair. Years would go by and I wouldn't hear anything about it, then suddenly all this anger would come out."

Affairs rock your world. Life is never the same again. All parties involved experience a profound sense of loss and pain. The old status quo is gone. The future is uncertain.

"After finding out, the hurt partner experiences the most basic loss of self," says Abrahms Spring. "You feel alien in your own skin. Your most basic assumptions about the order of the universe have been turned upside down. It's devastating."

The person confessing to an infidelity experiences the full gamut: guilt, self-loathing. Often there is also relief. Leading a double life can become increasingly difficult for people engaged in affairs. Getting the truth out relieves them of carrying the burden of betrayal alone. To some therapists, honesty is essential, too, if the couple is to stay married and lay down a new framework for their relationship. Some people are glad that the affair is over and want to reestablish their marriage. "They're just so thankful to be with one person again in one place," explains Abrahms Spring. "They want to forgive and move forward."

The betrayed spouse may also find relief. Even if the affair seems to come out of the blue, the underlying causes of infidelity have probably been present for some time. Vaughan says she experienced relief when her husband told her the truth about his numerous affairs. "It was like a storm that flattens everything and allows fresh air to come through," she says. "The years of knowing subconsciously that something was wrong was much more painful than the two or so years it took us to recover."

Still the aftermath was hard. Vaughan has described how it took her almost a decade to rebuild her sense of self even though she and her husband had successfully reestablished their marriage in a couple of years. All in all, they've been married 43 years.

The "other" person, meanwhile, faces a whole different set of issues. How do you rebuild your life without the affair. At first there is profound aloneness and confusion. "She's not in the Bahamas or running around in mink," says Florida researcher Layton-Tholl. "She's at home, waiting for him to call, to explain himself and the promises he made."

All parties in extramarital affairs often report thoughts of suicide, according to family therapists. As Abrahms Spring writes in her book: "What people want to kill is not themselves but the pain."

Secrecy may be what sustains the affair while it is going on, but it also exacerbates the pain when it is over. Suddenly, there is no one to talk to. The loved one is gone. Unlike a death or divorce that prompts support from family and friends, the breakup of an affair goes largely unnoticed.

Yet everyone in the triangle suffers a sense of loss--a loss of self and a loss of love. Researchers believe the great hypocrisy in our culture is that while affairs are so prevalent, most people remain largely unsympathetic and closed to the complexities and pain. They slip into the stereotypes about infidelity and offer pat advice: Leave the no-good two-timer. Or focus on labels: Home wrecker. Or blame themselves: I wasn't sexy enough.

Cliches provide protection. "We don't want to believe that a man could have an affair on a wife who is loving and sensual and kind," says psychologist Glass. "That means it could happen to us."

[Illustration]

ILLUSTRATION; MARK ZANGRELLI; PHOTO; AFP; PHOTO; PARAMOUNT PICTURES; PHOTO; THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER/PAIGE WILLIAMS Caption: Affairs Of The Rich And Famous: Diplomat Pamela Harriman, Top Left, And Actress Ingrid Bergman, Top Right, Were Involved In Liaisons That Are The Stuff Of Legend; TV Journalist Charles Kuralt, Above, And Pat Shannon, Right, With Her Daughter Kathleen, Secretly Carried On An Affair For 30 Years.

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