

## **CHP 2: The Unfaithful Partner's Response: Lost in a Labyrinth of Choices**

"Going back to my marriage feels like a prison sentence. But I can't abandon my kids."

"I know I strayed, but I didn't mean to hurt you, and I never stopped loving you. Can't we move on?"

No matter how badly you feel, the effects of your infidelity are almost never as shattering, disorienting or profound for you as they are for the person you deceived.

The experience of having a lover has validated you.

You are experiencing your own definition of hell. Unburdening yourself or your secret should take a huge weight off your mind and offer some temporary relief, but you are likely to remain as conflicted as before. While a part of you may irresistibly be drawn to your lover, another part may be disgusted with yourself for cheating or making your children suffer.

Identify your intense and contradictory feelings and recognize how appropriate and normal they are at this stage of your journey:

- Relief
- Impatience
- Chronic anxiety
- Justified anger
- Absence of guilt
- Guilt over the children
- Isolation
- Hopelessness
- Paralysis
- Self-disgust

### **Relief: "I'm tired of lying."**

Once the truth is out, it is usual to feel a surge of relief. Even if you don't know where you're headed, you're likely to feel deliciously extricated from the complications that your lies and deceptions created for you. You may even feel cleansed or sanitized.

"It had become ridiculous, juggling two lives. I couldn't manage the deception, never mind the pressure. If I knew I was going to have sex with my boyfriend on Wednesday afternoon, I'd make love with Jeff on Tuesday night so he wouldn't expect it again so soon. I came to dread his advances. When he finally found out, I swore off my boyfriend, and for the first time in years, my life

came into focus. It felt wonderful, being one person – always in one place, always where I was supposed to be.”

“I had lied so much to so many people, I didn’t know anymore who I was, and what I had said to whom. I couldn’t keep my lives apart, or separate truth from fiction. I was always scared to death of slipping up and getting caught.

**Impatience: “I’ve left my lover and told you everything. What more do you want from me?”**

It’s not just that you want to reconnect, but, more selfishly, that you want to stop feeling guilty every time you confront your partner’s pain.

“How long do I have to put up with my partner’s incessant, guilt-inducing verbal assaults that seem to resolve nothing and only pull the two of us further apart?”

There are no quick fixes, no magic words. What will heal you is what Melanie Beattie calls “the passage of experiences” – those small, concrete acts, those cumulative moments that convince your partner that you’ve faced your own duplicity, our own unbeautiful self, and are safe to trust again. Through caring acts, making your partner feel secure, values and willing to risk loving you again.

**Chronic Anxiety: “As long as I keep busy, I’ll be okay.”**

One way you manage your anxiety, not that the affair is out in the open, is to plunge into a flurry of activity, sometimes purposeful, other times meaningless; sometimes to build a new life, other times to avoid thinking about it.

Watching TV, exercising, shopping, reading, socializing – as long as it draws you away from the real task of confronting yourself and your life.

“I never gave myself a chance to think, much less feel anything. In one week I quit smoking, started working out, designed a new wing off the bedroom of our house, reorganized my office, and bought a new, expensive recreational toy – a faster, sleeker boat. Change was the operative word. It took months to realize that I hadn’t even begun dealing with any of the real issues.”

These escapist tactics is nothing but a superficial and temporary fix.

**Absence of Guilt: “I’m doing what I want to do and it feels right.”**

Even after the affair is revealed, you may feel little or no guilt over your behaviour, no remorse for breaking your covenant of trust. There are five common reasons why you feel no guilt or need to apologize:

- 1) You’ve written off the relationship and are using the affair to expedite your exit.
- 2) You have a characterological disorder that makes you incapable of experiencing compassion or remorse for anyone.
- 3) You’re angry at your partner.
- 4) You’re euphoric about your lover.
- 5) You hold certain assumptions about infidelity that justify your affair.

### *Anger at Your Partner*

There could be many reasons for your anger. You may feel undernourished, taken for granted, used. You may feel you've given up too much for too little, sacrificed important goals or dreams, delayed any real personal gratification for too much long. Years of accumulated resentment may leave little room for any other emotion. You may feel more anger toward your partner than guilt. That's because the two emotions are inversely related: The greater your anger, the less your guilt; the more venom you direct at your partner, the less you direct at yourself. The anger you experience may be a legitimate response to the way your partner has treated you, or a defense against the guilt you feel for what you've done ("It is human nature to hate those whom you have injured." What makes it hard to know the difference is that anger always *feels* justified – it's a basic characteristic of the emotion.

Anger often has a sanctimonious edge to it, and may make you feel entitled to go elsewhere for the love and attention you think you deserve but never got at home.

### *Euphoria Over the Affair*

Transported by an intense sexual or emotional connection to your lover, removed from the mundane obligations of an enduring relationship, you may not care about or even question how your affair affects others. "I feel so supremely happy, so in sync with the world, I don't want to analyze it." The unadulterated joy you feel may signal to you that what you're experiencing is true love at last and leave no room for guilt. It may signify only that the affair has a powerful, intoxicating hold on you at this moment in time.

### *Core Assumptions That Justify Infidelity*

A third reason why you may not experience guilt is that you hold certain core assumptions that justify your adulterous behaviour. Some of these assumptions are likely to predate your relationship and reflect long-held ideas about love and commitment. Others may be rationalizations, conjured up to protect your self-esteem, suppress your guilt, and grant you permission to stray. To the extent that you believe them, you're likely to feel little compunction about your behaviour:

- "My affair is permissible as long as I love the other person."
- "My affair is permissible as long as I don't love the other person."
- "What my partner doesn't know won't hurt him/her."
- "A one-night stand, a fling, doesn't change our relationship."
- "I only have one life to lead and deserve to be as happy as possible. It's okay to get some of my needs met from my lover, and the rest from my spouse."
- "My affair has made me a happier person and therefore a better partner."
- "My affair lets me satisfy my needs without breaking up the family. I'm doing it for the kids."
- "People aren't meant to be monogamous."

- “I have no impulse control.”
- “My biological instinct is to be adulterous.”
- “All men are wolves.”
- “Every couple has its secrets.”
- “I’m entitled to keep a part of myself hidden and separate from my partner.”
- “Since my partner probably knows about my affair but isn’t confronting me, it must be okay as long as I don’t flaunt it.”
- “I shouldn’t have to sacrifice what I need to make my partner feel secure or happy.”
- “I never promised to be perfect.”
- “If I commit myself fully to any one person, I’m bound to get hurt.”

I encourage you to look at these and other assumptions that lie behind your feelings and ask yourself:

- Are these ideas true?
- Are these ideas useful? Do they still serve me today?

### **Grieving the Loss of the Lover: “I’ll never get over this person who made me feel so special.”**

After you end the affair, you may feel guilty for abandoning your lover, and mourn your lover’s loss for months or even years. This new companion may have seemed like a lifeline to you, drawing you into a world of sexual intimacy and excitement that you thought was out of reach. You may have felt understood and cared for in a way you no longer dreamed was possible. Or perhaps you just had more fun and felt more alive. Above all, your lover may have changed the way you experienced yourself – bolstering your self-esteem in some deeply corrective way, and making you feel more intelligent, competent, attractive, sensual, adventuresome. In short, the experience of romantic love may have helped you “overcome the structures of the self.”

Guilt is one emotion you’re likely to feel; grief is another – grief for the loss of someone who may have restored your youthful vision of yourself and given you a glimpse of a better life.

Your guilt at deserting your lover may infuriate your partner even more than the affair itself: What could be more insulting, more demeaning, than living with someone who cares more about a lover’s feelings than your own?

Both of you should consider that what you, the unfaithful partner, have come to value so deeply is not necessarily the lover, but how the lover makes you feel; that what you’re seeking is not a replacement for your partner but an alteration of your basic sense of self; and that what you need can perhaps be found with your partner, if you’re both willing to open yourselves to change. You may both have to live with the ghost of the lover, but that doesn’t mean your life together can’t be rich and fulfilling.

### **Guilt Over the Children: “What kind of role model am I?”**

As a parent, you're likely to worry about the effect your affair is having on your children, and on their feelings toward you. What could be more frightening than the prospect of losing their love and respect? In your heart, you want them to see you as a parent they can look up to, not someone who is confused or lost, not someone who has abandoned them.

All they'll hear is that you're threatening the family and the security of their lives.

Your guilt toward your children is likely to intensify if you were a victim of your own parent's infidelity. As you think of throwing your kids into the same brutal crossfire, you're bound to relive your own childhood traumas.

### **Isolation: "No one's there for me."**

Your parents and many of your friends may judge you harshly and cut you off from your usual sources of emotional support.

The cruelest rejection may come from your parents. "She's looking straight through me, wondering where she went wrong, and how I got so screwed up."

If your parents are deeply religious or hold conservative values, they may treat you as a degenerate, a pariah, a family disgrace, and pressure you to stay with your partner and end the affair.

### **Hopelessness: "There's no way this relationship will ever work."**

It's common at this early stage to see your relationship as an emotional death camp, with no chance of pardon or escape. You may decide to stay for many reasons – fear of being alone, guilt, the children, financial security, a sense of moral responsibility – but you're likely to assume that love is gone forever and that your partner is incapable of meeting your needs.

"Cindy seems to know what I need and what I'm thinking even before I do," he told me. "She makes me feel appreciated. She accepts me for who I am. Judy doesn't have a clue about me, and I don't think she's capable of changing. I'm going to stick it out with her because of the kids, but I feel like I'm incarcerating myself."

Jerry's *belief* that his wife couldn't support him became a self-fulfilling prophecy. He never communicated to her in ways that let her hear what he was asking for. He never gave her a chance to change. He never tested whether she could respond to his needs.

### **Paralysis: "I don't know which way to go."**

To leave or stay, to run off with your lover or say goodbye – these critical choices are likely to leave you paralyzed with indecision, unable to move or stand still. All you know is that you can't juggle two lives anymore – it's too much to handle.

I never expected to fall in love, but I have, and now I don't know what to do. My husband's a decent person, and I'm not unhappy in our marriage, but I'm

not ready to give up Evan, either. I can't just jump back into the marriage and pretend I want to be there. I'm really in over my head.

"On one hand, I'm telling my wife, 'Let's work things out'; on the other, I'm sneaking off with Edie. And the more time I spend with her, the more confused I get."

Part of your ambivalence may come from the fact that you were swept up in an affair without really understanding the consequences, or without consciously seeking it out, and now feel gripped by emotions you can't control. You may be intoxicated with life in a way you haven't been for years, and unable to extricate yourself from the excitement.

Any resolution may seem more appealing than this impossible balancing act, but nothing is clear or obvious, and every solution seems weighted with compromise. Your relationship with your spouse may not be so terrible, nor your relationship with your lover so fantastic. "If I put as much tenderness and care into my marriage as I do into my affair, would it be as good?" you may begin to wonder.

You could find yourself shedding one unrewarding relationship for another – encumbered, this time, with alimony and visitation rights every other Sunday.

- Do I still love my partner?
- What is love?
- Am I normal?
- Am I justified?
- How do I get answers?
- Why is this happening?
- How do I get out – and from which relationship?

Love is not pure; it's made of many complex, sometimes contradictory feelings. While part of you says, "If only I could make a clean break from my lover and commit myself to my spouse," another part rejoins, "If only I could run off with my lover and block out the past."

Whatever you decide, your partner is likely be ravaged by your attachment to another person, and to doubt that the two of you can ever love each other again. Human beings aren't constructed to feel one way about anything – least of all love.

### **Self-Disgust: "I have nothing to say in my defense. I feel like a sleaze."**

Whatever you now feel about your love life – relieved, empowered, ambivalent, trapped – you may also feel deeply ashamed of yourself for violating religious or family values that enjoined you to honor marital vows and stay the course. Having trampled on your scruples and perhaps broken your partner's heart, you're likely to feel that you've betrayed everyone who matters to you, including yourself.

All I can say is that I got completely swept up in the affair and acted like a selfish idiot. I don't think my behaviour is a reflection of my true character. I just think I was lost."

Guilt can be a healthy reminder that you've been untrue to your self, a message to live more closely to your convictions. But when it causes you to trash yourself, you learn nothing; when it makes you write yourself off as no good, you cheat yourself of valuable self-knowledge, I suggest, therefore, that you direct your reproach not at yourself, the person, but at those specific qualities within you that you dislike or consider maladaptive, and that may have led you to treat your partner so shoddily and deceptively while your affair was going on. Once you isolate these negative attributes, you can go to work remodeling them and open yourself to constructive change and self-forgiveness.

Among those qualities you may fault yourself for are:

- feeling so insecure, so uncertain about yourself, that you become vulnerable to the attention of those who build you up;
- keeping your unmet needs (companionship, affection, conversation, etc) from your partner, then going elsewhere to have them met.
- Feeling entitled to have your needs met without regarding for the needs of others;
- Craving excitement and novelty to the point of not being able to tolerate the ordinariness, the predictability of an enduring relationship;
- Ignoring or being unaware of your own personal conflicts, and blaming your unhappiness on your partner.

While you may want to explore these and other qualities that you consider unattractive in yourself, you do yourself a disservice if you focus on them exclusively and ignore your partner's role. You have no right to blame your partner for your affair – no one makes you cheat – but you have every right to address how your partner contributed to your dissatisfaction.

**Sex Differences: Do they influence the way you respond to an affair.**

Current research on extramarital attitudes and behaviours shows that women are more apt to have affairs for love and companionship, while men are more often content with sex alone. Women are likely to believe that their infidelity is justified if it's for love; men are likely to believe their infidelity is justified if it's not for love. Women are also more likely to anguish over the affair than men are.

These findings won't excuse you in your partner's eyes – your insistence that you couldn't help yourself, that you did what any man or woman would, won't get you very far – but they may help your partner get inside your head, and spark a useful discussion about the meaning of the affair and the deficiencies in your relationship.

### **Difference #1: Women Seek Soulmates; Men Seek Playmates**

Women “I finally found someone I can open up to”

Men “My lover and I share so much – sex, tennis, jazz”

In general, women have affairs to experience an emotional connection that they feel is lacking in their primary relationship. They stray in search of a soulmate, someone who pays attention to their feelings and encourages meaningful conversation. Women like to talk, and they develop an intimate bond through verbal interaction. As sex therapists like to point out, a woman's arousal usually begins outside the bedroom, her partner engages her in an emotional (not merely physical) foreplay that enhances her feelings of warmth and security, and, in turn, feeds her sexual responsiveness. Women who stray often develop a close friendship with their lovers before they become sexually involved. Once a physical bond develops, they continue to seek a more committed intimacy.

Men, in contrast, are more likely to have affairs that lack emotional attachment. They tend to enjoy doing active things, sexual or nonsexual, with their lovers, and to feel closer to them through non-verbal play. Often it's a man's physical attraction to another woman, not a need for friendship, that draws him into an affair, and it's that unencumbered sexual adventure more than understanding or closeness that kept him there. At the time of the affair men are less apt than women to be dissatisfied at home.

If you're a woman, for instance, you might question how directly you've conveyed to your partner who dissatisfied you are with your relationship, and exactly what you need to restore the intimacy that's missing. After learning about the affair, hurt partners often lament that they weren't ever given a chance to address their partner's complaints.

If you're a man, you might question why you got involved with your lover and how unhappy you were in your primary relationship at that time. What began as a superficial attraction may have catapulted into sexual passion, and then evolved into a strong emotional connection. You may end up replacing your partner, when you weren't that dissatisfied to begin with, only later to discover that your new relationship is as conflict ridden as your marriage ever was.

### **Difference #2: Women Believe Their Affair is justified when it's for love: Men when it's not for love**

Women "But I loved him"

Man "But I didn't love her"

Women tend to attach themselves more deeply to their lovers, both emotionally and sexually, which is one reason that their affairs more often lead to divorce.

In general, men believe that extramarital sex is acceptable and even condoned by society as long as it's only a fling and no one finds out. They tend to minimize the significance of a sexual tryst, seeing it as an inconsequential event, an accident, a momentary release.

### **Difference #3: Women anguish over their affairs, men enjoy them**

Women: My affair has complicated my life

Men: My affair has given me life

In general, women tend to experience more conflict over their sexual transgressions than men and are less likely to believe their affairs are justified, under any circumstances. As I pointed out above, a woman once involved, is more likely to get emotionally entangled with her lover and to have difficulty separating sex from love. In a recent study

of unfaithful wives, Carol Botwin found that women as a rule are not as liberated by affairs as men; they anguish more, experience more guilt, become more dissatisfied with their marriages, and feel more dependent on their lovers.”

Women who defy traditional feminine virtues “self-denial, self-sacrifice, self-effacement, self-restraint” are more likely to feel guilty when they act independently and put their own needs first, for whatever reasons.

Men seem to be better equipped to separate their affairs from the main current of their lives. Because they tend to spend less time thinking about people” and reminiscing about important moments in their relationships, their affairs are often less central to them, and preoccupy them less. Their ability to enjoy the non-intimate or anonymous aspects of their sexual relationship more than women partially explains their greater infatuation with X-rated movies, just as men are more easily aroused in a vacuum – by the simple sight and novelty of visual images- so they’re better able to enjoy sexual stimulation with an anonymous lover, without the emotional complications they often dread. In a recent, nationwide survey of sexual behaviour, 54 percent of men reported having erotic thoughts at least once a day, as compared to only 19 percent of women.

If you’re a woman who is having an affair, you’ve probably invested a great deal of time thinking about your lover. But it may be – be prepared to hate hearing this – that this investment has led you to attribute more love and specialness to your illicit relationship than it warrants. If, like many women, you have difficulty justifying an affair that’s purely sexual, your guilt may lead you to exaggerate your dissatisfaction at home and magnify your love for your love.

If you’re a man who is having an affair, you may trick yourself into believing you can keep sexual relationships simple. Unfortunately for you, your lover may react in ways typical of her sex, and come to demand more intimacy and commitment, thereby changing the rules of your game. Should this happen, say goodbye to the freedom and enhancement the affair once gave you.

Once the affair is out in the open, you need to decide whether to work on rebuilding your relationship or end it. Whichever route you choose, I encourage you to choose it deliberately, and not to act on feelings alone. Feelings, no matter how intense, are based on assumptions that are often highly subjective and may prove to be unrealistic, unuseful, or untrue. What feels right to you now you may later regret as an impulsive and unprocessed response that can't be easily reversed.

Two of your options are dead-end. The first is to stay together and never address why the affair happened or work to assure that it won't happen again. This is a ticket to a life of quiet, or not so quiet desperation. The second is for you to stay together, with at least one of you continuing to be unfaithful, while the other fights back depression or rage. This is no more promising.

**Unrequited Love: “If I didn’t love him so much, I couldn’t tolerate the way he treats me.”**

Unrequited love is an intense but unwarranted attachment to your partner that makes you want to stay together, no matter how dysfunctional the relationship.

Linda went from therapist to therapist, searching for strategies to lure her husband back. She didn't know it, but what she was really searching for was her lost self- the self that informed her that the intense pain and emptiness she was feeling came from loving someone who was brutally selfish and treated her with contempt.

**Romantic Love: “I’m so ready to risk everything for a person who makes me feel so happy, so loved, so alive”**

Romantic love is an intense but unwarranted attachment that you, the unfaithful partner, may feel toward your lover. It's likely to make you want to leave your partner, no matter how satisfying your life together has been.

“My love for the lover must be real,” you assume, “otherwise I wouldn't feel such high chemistry and be willing to sacrifice so much for this person.” The blind spot behind this feeling – what you fail to see – 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. For the sake of an exhilarating high, which you're bound to come down from if the relationship lasts, you risk discarding a potentially salvageable, rewarding, lifelong relationship with your partner.

How do you distinguish between a torrid but temporary attachment and an enduring covenant of love? Why turn away from romance when it feels so wonderful, or stay with your partner when your gut instinct is to run?

### **Emotional Changes in Romantic Love**

Romantic love is full of "rapture, transport, transcendence, and bliss." This sublime connection is referred to as high chemistry, is effortless, and fills you with a sense that you've met your perfect match.

In romantic love, your lover often becomes the single focus of your life, filling you, body and soul. You have a strong desire to spend every free moment together, to merge, to become one. You think about your lover constantly; you want to do things for and with this person, constantly. And because people tend to assign meaning to the way they feel and behave, you interpret your reaction as true love. What else could explain your all-embracing obsession?

The more time and emotion you invest in your lover – buying presents, planning time together – the more love you're likely to feel for that person. Similarly, the less time and emotion you invest in your partner, the less love you're likely to experience for him or her.