

Can Marriage Be Saved After Another Affair?

DR. SCANTLING,

My friends tell me that I'm a fool because I'm thinking of taking my husband back again after he has had a serious affair. It's not his first. We've been married for more than 20 years, and we have three great kids. I really love him and don't want to hurt the family or our possible future — whatever that might be. Maybe I'm naive, but I really believe he wants to make our



DR. SANDRA SCANTLING
INTIMACY, SEX
& RELATIONSHIP

marriage work. He's a wonderful father, and we've weathered many storms together. He hung in there with me when I battled thyroid cancer and is a kind, generous man. He has gotten into therapy, and we plan to get into couples therapy together. I just want to know if you think I'm making the right decision. What if he does this again?

— **LORI, SOUTHTON**

DEAR LORI,

I admire your courage for not just giving up on your marriage without giving it your best shot. I've heard women say, "If my husband ever cheated on me, I'd leave him in a flash." But when the rubber meets the road, they're not so quick to turn the key and walk away. Your friends don't live your life; you do.

Before you decide, you need to ask yourself if you're ready to expose yourself and your family to a possible repeat episode. You need to have a Plan B. The best predictor of future behavior

is past performance. You make a good case for bringing him back, but I wonder if you're doing it because you're more afraid of the alternatives. What's your evidence that he's ready to rebuild your intimacy this time (aside from his willingness to get into therapy)? Is he coming clean about the details of the affair?

Because none of us is perfect, I accept that we sometimes do crazy self-destructive (and other destructive) things for unknown reasons. If your husband is showing real regret and a willingness to take responsibility for his actions and repair your relationship, I'd give it a solid try in therapy. He may finally be ready to commit. Find an experienced professional, and set specific goals and time lines together. Ask the tough questions: Is there a risk he was exposed to an STD? Is he willing to take an AIDS test? Did he use condoms? How will you handle the impact this has had on the kids? Talk about the good times and the bad. But if all you do is argue in the therapist's office, forget it. You can do that on your own at no charge.

Affairs are treacherous. The emotional fallout on partners and families lingers for years. But they can be healed.

DR. SCANTLING,

I'm in my second marriage and I'm lonely, as lonely as I was in my first. I seem to keep marrying passive men. My first husband was a good provider and father to our son, but he was unemotional. After eight years, I decided to file for divorce. I dated for about a year and fell head-over-heels for my

(then married) personal trainer. I know that this sounds doomed from the start, but I really thought we loved each other. We had amazing chemistry. I thought I had found what I was looking for. He divorced his wife, and we got married. That was only four years ago, and for some reason (that he won't discuss) he has turned off to me sexually. I've kept in shape, but he's just not interested. He's spending more time away from home, and I'm becoming more and more suspicious.

The smallest things set us both off, and we're fighting most of the time. I try to talk to him but he tunes me out. He calls me a nag, and I call him an irresponsible passive-aggressive loser. What should we do? Do you think he's cheating again? He tells me I'm just being jealous. I'm desperate and want our love back.

— **FELICIA, EAST WINDSOR**

DEAR FELICIA,

The last thing you need is for someone to say I told you so, but I could have told you so! Revolving-door marriages are doomed from the start — especially when they begin with infidelity. Neither of you can trust the other, because if you cheated once, what's to say you won't do it again?

Love is more than heat between the sheets. You say you want your "love" back. Are you sure that what you had was love, or were you both just scratching an itch? I don't know why he's spending more time away, but where there's smoke ... But I can assure you that nagging or calling him names isn't helping.

You describe both husbands as

"passive." Do you think you might be described as controlling? These two personalities often find each other. Being critical of your partner is a great way to deflate his ego and increase his resentment — not a terrific formula for getting love.

Instead of bouncing from one marriage to the next, find a skilled intimacy therapist to learn about how you've contributed to your own loneliness. When have you felt loved in your life and how have you pushed it away? Do this for yourself and for your son.

If your marriage was based on more than a physical attraction, you both have a lot of work to do together. I understand you would like your love back, but what are you willing to give him that he needs? The big question is whether he's willing to come clean and be your husband.

Women complain that their husbands "tune them out" — so they nag louder. They're not deaf — they just don't want to hear what you're saying. If this marriage goes south, treat yourself more kindly next time. Give yourself enough time to sort out the pieces, or you're likely to find yourself with divorce No. 3.

Dr. Sandra Scantling is a licensed clinical psychologist and certified sex therapist. She practices in Farmington. You may e-mail her at AskDrScantling@aol.com and her website is www.dr.sandy.com. This column is not intended as a substitute for professional, medical or psychological advice, diagnosis or treatment. Case material used here includes composites and is not intended to represent any actual couple or individual.