

# BEFORE AND AFTER THE AFFAIR

There's a joke that goes: What's the difference between a psychotic and a neurotic? A psychotic believes  $2 + 2 = 5$ ; a neurotic says, " $2 + 2 = 4$ , but I just can't stand it!"

When it comes to affairs, people know the right answer but can't stand facing it.

They ask: Is it an affair if we're just good friends? How about if you're thinking about someone else while you're making love to your partner? Is



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## INTIMACY, SEX & RELATIONSHIP

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seeing a prostitute an affair? What if you see the same prostitute regularly and begin to care about her? Is emotional attachment without sex an affair? Is sex without attachment an affair?

I say yes to all of these. If it feels like an affair, it usually is. If you're involved with another partner in a secretive intimate way, if it's something you wish your partner wouldn't do to you, if it's something you wouldn't want your children to do someday, you're being unfaithful.

There are few behaviors that violate a couple's trust,

commitment and safety more than having an affair. The fallout is extensive. Couples who have affairs know they're playing with fire — that's one of the things that makes it so exciting. They also know that infidelity or attachment to the wrong person won't solve problems of boredom, poor self-esteem or a mid-life crisis.

So other than saying this is neurotic, why do so many people risk so much for so little? Why would you jeopardize your reputation, your relationship, the stability of your family, your health (picking up HIV or a sexually transmitted disease, passing it to your partner) for some furtive moments of passion or idealized romantic attraction?

Not all affairs are "accidental." Some are planned. There are chat rooms and websites for those "married, but looking." Couples try to justify affairs by claiming "they make me feel better about myself" or "I can have the best of both worlds — I can be married, have the good wife and home and the lover on the side." These couples may be legally married but not in reality. When your vows are

broken and you've decided to cheat, you cheat everyone that cares about you — including yourself.

Chuck, a 35-year-old construction worker, called me in a panic after confirming his worst fears. One night before bed, he saw his wife's cell phone on the nightstand, and couldn't resist checking her call list.

Jessica, 33, had been spending more time at the gym (to get rid of the residual "baby weight" she claimed), more late nights out with "the girls" and more reasons to come to bed late after he was asleep. She rarely initiated sex, but he attributed that to the hormonal changes of post-pregnancy. When Chuck asked if something was wrong, she'd deny it.

Now, as he frantically scrolled down her list, his hands trembled and his heart raced as he searched for what he prayed he wouldn't find ... the name was Keith. Wasn't that her newest associate at work? The evidence was all there — hours of calls at all times of the day and night. Could Jessica be having an affair? Chuck felt fear, anger and disgust. Now what? What should he say when she denies the affair or claims that Keith is "just a good friend?"

And what did Jessica have to say about her behavior? In our first session, she told me that she wasn't looking for an affair — "it just happened." She said she still "loves" Chuck, but isn't "in love" with him. Since the baby was born, she feels less "sexual" and like a "feeding diapering machine." "Keith makes her feel beautiful, attractive and wanted as a woman."

How did all of this begin? I asked. "We just started going out to lunch together to discuss projects. We're both on the same team at work. He's an amazing listener and he really cares about me. He compliments me and does all the things that Chuck used to do when we first met. I just don't want to hurt Chuck. He's a great dad to our son and

## To Ask A Question ...

>> Our intimate relationships and sexual health are intensely personal concerns that many people find difficult to discuss. Please think of this as a safe place to have those concerns addressed. Write to me in confidence at: **AskDr-Scantling@aol.com**. Feel free to ask me whatever is on your mind regarding sexual wellness, health, intimacy and relationship -- mind, body or spirit. The large volume of e-mail I receive makes answering individual letters impossible, but your questions will help me identify the subjects most important to you and other NE Magazine readers. Some readers' letters will be chosen for publication and reply in the column. They will be edited to eliminate names and other personal identifying information.

an excellent provider."

"What will you do now?" I asked.

"I told Keith that I'm going to try to work things out with Chuck and see a therapist for two to three months, that we have to cut things off until I'm sure the marriage can't be saved, and only speak to each other in an emergency." Unless Jessica was willing to make a clean break from Keith, therapy would probably fail. She hadn't really let go of him. He was just on stand-by.

Affairs are enormously complicated. They're not only symptoms of problems, they create problems: insecurity, fear of abandonment, social exposure, erosion of intimacy, family fragmentation and more. Affairs set up deceitful triangles, suspicion and paranoia that have fueled a new industry of spy-ware for partners to "catch" the other in the act. The relationship that has been the cornerstone of your intimacy has become a lie.

So why don't people stay clear of these things? Quite simply, affairs are addicting. They can make you feel younger, wanted, excited and alive. Affairs actually cause the body to release an opiate-like substance of attraction that makes you feel intoxicated — almost superhuman. You're swept up in "euphoric recall" where the positive qualities of the new lover are exaggerated and the attributes of the current partner are devalued. If you think of an affair in this way, it's easier to understand why it's so hard to quit. But like other addictions, you must develop the skills and support network to quit.

What are the steps to rebuild trust?

You have to get honest with yourself and your committed partner. You must stop all (yes all) contact with the other person. No exceptions! You must bring your lifetime partner back as your confident. You must do whatever it takes to rebuild trust (this isn't easy and usually takes expert help). For some people, this may mean changing jobs to no longer have contact with the other person. As

with other addictive-like behaviors, you can expect urges (thoughts of the other), cravings (physical and psychological symptoms of sleeplessness, loss of appetite or increased hunger, depression, etc.), and lapses (where you yield to cravings after promising to end it). When this happens, you must come clean with your partner (and yourself, of course). Recovery from affairs is not a one time "apology." It's not a sprint, it's a marathon. You'll be tested and retested. Actions, not promises, count.

The ending of the story about Jessica and Chuck is fortunately a very positive one. Jessica wasn't aware that she had postpartum depression and responded well to antidepressant medications and therapy. Chuck is learning how to see his wife as loving mother of his child and sensual woman. Both of them are looking more honestly at themselves and at their relationship.

So what happens to couples who marry the person they cheated with? Do you think their lust lasts? How can you ever trust the one who was your "partner in crime?"

Let's face it, all things change. The new car smell doesn't last forever. There are no shortcuts to long-lasting love. I recently asked my mom about the secret to her 60-year marriage to my father. (He still brings her roses for no particular occasion. They always hold hands when they walk down the street.)

"Your dad is my best friend," she answered, "and that's how I treat him." It's as simple as  $2 + 2 = 4$ .

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