

Collection 1: Personally Recovering

151 Questions and Responses by Peggy Vaughan

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SUSPICION

How can I know if my partner is having an affair?

(I receive many questions related to determining whether or not an affair is taking place. Below are 6 questions which are typical of the ones received about this issue.)

Question # 1:

How do I know if my wife is cheating?

Question # 2:

What are some warning signs of cheating?

Question # 3:

How do you know for certain that someone is having an affair?

Question # 4:

My girlfriend has been doing things to make me think she could be cheating on me. How do I know for sure?

Question # 5:

How do I find out for sure if he is having an affair?

Question # 6:

When talking to my husband about my suspicion of him cheating on me he always says, "That's your imagination." Could this be a clue of his cheating?

Peggy's Response:

There's no 1-2-3 process for knowing when a partner has had an affair, but for most people, the first clue of an affair is not the stereotypical (obvious) things that most people think about. The very first clue is usually a "gut feeling" that something is wrong. (Most people reported having this feeling, although it varied in the way it appeared. For some it was a sudden feeling that resulted from a casual comment or incident, while for others it came as a growing feeling of uneasiness.)

It's understandable that we tend to sense that "something is wrong"—because what we're sensing is the emotional distance that takes place when someone is keeping such a big secret. They put up an invisible barrier to keep you (and your suspicions) at bay.

We also tend to sense that "something is different"—because we become aware of some changes in our partner's behavior.

Below is an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*, including a list of some of the changes we might detect:

- more distant*
- more preoccupied with job, home, or outside interests*
- more attentive to clothes and accessories*

- more focused on weight and appearance*
- more absent from home with time unaccounted for*
- more glued to the TV set than usual*
- more interested in trying new things sexually than before*
- less attentive*
- less willing to talk or spend time together*
- less available emotionally*
- less interested in family issues*
- less interested in sex than usual*
- less involved in shared activities*

It's tempting to look at this list, find that many of the items fit your partner's behavior, and jump to the conclusion that they're having an affair; but it's not that simple. Determining whether or not there's any significance to the changes in behavior depends on evaluating both the number of areas of change and the degree of change. For instance, changes in only a few areas would not be as significant as changes in many different areas. And very slight changes would not be as significant as more drastic ones.

“But even if there has been a great deal of change in a large number of areas, this does not necessarily signal an affair. There are many reasons for such changes in behavior that have nothing to do with affairs, one of the most likely being an increased level of stress in the work environment. Other possible causes include concerns about health, aging, family, or finances. Unfortunately, the possibility of an affair is so frightening to most people that they either suppress their awareness of these changes or rationalize that they are temporary, or insignificant, or due to some problem that will just “go away.” Whether or not the changes are due to an affair, they indicate a problem that needs to be discussed.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Of course, even being convinced that there is a problem, many people still hesitate to ask directly about an affair. They may have an understandable tendency to want to deny that it could be happening. Also, if someone is not clear about wanting the truth and being prepared to face the truth, they can be sure they will only get reassurance—but it may be false reassurance, which doesn't help to resolve this issue. So the first question to be asked does not need to be directed toward the spouse; the first question is one that each person must first ask themselves: “Do you really want to know for sure?”

The only realistic way to deal with suspicions and concerns is to get them out in the open. This is not to say that it should be done quickly or casually; but thoughtfully opening a conversation about dealing with possible attractions is something all couples need to do—before any specific suspicions develop. And even if it isn't done earlier, it's “better late than never.”

Does guilt lead to giving "signs" of affair?

Question:

I cannot find any real information regarding what acts of guilt may be displayed by a spouse who is having (or has had) an affair. It seems there might be something that makes the suspicious spouse suspicious. I have read many lists of "the signs," but I have not found any that regarded guilt traits in particular to "cover" or that desire to be "self-revealing." Have you ever compiled such a list?

Peggy's Response:

I have not compiled such a list—and frankly, don't expect to because I think that whatever "acts of guilt" may lead to the spouse being suspicious or to discovering the affair are primarily subconscious acts on the part of the person having an affair, not "signs" they are consciously sending out.

Sometimes a person having an affair just gets lazy and isn't as careful as they intend to be, thus leading to suspicions. And sometimes (most often), they're just blocking out the possibility of getting caught, so pursue actions they could know would create suspicion—if they were focusing on whether or not they might be exposing something.

As strange as it may seem, most people having affairs do not focus on the consequences of "getting caught." To do so would interfere with the enjoyment of the experience, so they simply block out any focus on the risk they are taking.

While men may be better able to "compartmentalize" their lives in this way, women may tend to feel more guilt and thus not be as capable of blocking out potential consequences. (Since any "signs" from women who feel guilty are likely to be in terms of crying, husbands are likely to dismiss their crying as just "the way they are" and wouldn't necessarily see it as a sign of anything as serious as having an affair.)

In general, I don't think people *deliberately* set out to get caught. (The only time it might come close to that is among those who are having what has been termed an "exit affair"—which means they've already decided they want to exit the marriage, and the affair is just a tool in moving toward that eventuality.)

In other words, sometimes people may be in so much pain/turmoil (whether due to guilt or other motives) that just "want it to end" one way or the other, and are thus willing to be discovered (in order to put themselves out of their misery). But I still haven't seen much evidence of any *direct* efforts to increase suspicion or to get caught.

For instance, if someone *really* wants to be discovered, they can always simply *tell* their spouse themselves. And when *that* happens, it is often because they feel guilty and want to somehow "make things right."

Should I go behind his back?

Question:

I found out three months ago that my husband (of 4 years) cheated on me two years ago. I feel that I need him to allow me access to all of his email, but he's angered by my requests—says they feel "wrong." I honestly don't believe he's cheating on me now, but why does he want to keep this private? What should I do? Should I go behind his back to find out what he may or may not be hiding?

Peggy's Response:

It's not particularly helpful to think in terms of "right" or "wrong" when it comes to wanting to have access to a partner's email, etc., after an affair. However, it is definitely a "reasonable" request—and the denial of that reasonable request is indicative of a partner's lack of understanding of the legitimacy of the request *and* a lack of their willingness to support the effort to recover from the affair.

In most instances, when someone turns a reasonable request into a defensive attack, it feels like they are unwilling to take responsibility for the impact of their actions. Even more critical, it feels like they are uncaring about the impact of their behavior on their partner—which does even more damage. So regardless of why someone might want to keep their mail private, they have compromised their "right to privacy" by having been untrustworthy. One key way of regaining trust is to be an "open book." So even if/when there's no particularly *reason* to be suspicious, this kind of refusal to be open inevitably leads to suspicion/concern in this kind of situation where there has been an affair.

However, "going behind someone's back" is just more of the kind of secretiveness that is so damaging to a relationship in the first place. It's not really "either-or" in that it's not "either" checking up on a partner behind their back "or" not checking up at all. Since the desire/need to know what's going on is a reasonable one—it's reasonable to "check up"—but let your partner know up-front that you're doing it. There's nothing to be gained by perpetuating the kind of secrecy that was inherent in the affair. And there's much to gain by *both* people recognizing the need for more openness/honesty between them about *all* aspects of their relationship. Then if/when real trust is established, there will not be the same need/desire to "check up." But until that time, developing and maintaining as much openness/honesty as possible is an essential aspect of effectively dealing with this situation.

Am I just as guilty?

Question:

I recently found out that my wife of 12 years had an affair. Even though I am deeply hurt, I feel guilty about the way I found out... I read her diary. I know that what I did is a major violation of trust. If I do decide to discuss the affair with her, how will this affect the discussion? Aren't I just as guilty as her?

Peggy's Response:

This attitude is to be respected in that it shows a recognition of the importance of honesty in a relationship—and a recognition that what he did was a "violation of trust." However, equating reading a diary with having an affair is simply not reasonable.

Any effort to deal with the affair or to recover and learn from this experience depends on getting beyond the "blaming" and "comparing blame." Instead, the focus needs to be on both parties taking responsibility for being honest from this moment on.

It's possible to respond to a crisis situation like this as an opportunity to develop real honesty. But this can't happen until there's a willingness to drop the "guilt trip" and try to actually *do* whatever is called for to rectify the situation. The past is over, and can't be changed. "Being sorry" (on either part) is not enough. The question is, "What are you going to do about it?"

Have you ever heard of such an affair?

Question:

I have for several years thought that "something" did not feel right in my relationship with my wife. I had thought several times, "she must be having an affair." About 11 months ago I asked her and she said no, it turns out this was not true. She lied several times to me and now says that she did not have any form of sex with him. Question: have you ever heard of such an affair? She has told me they kissed, "made out" and even took showers together ("but had their swim suites on").

Peggy's Response:

After 20 years of hearing so many stories, there's very little I haven't heard regarding affairs. The kind of denial/rationalization described above is not uncommon, but I'll go through this particular letter to comment on some of the main points.

"...for several years I thought that "something" did not feel right in my relationship."

Most people report that they suspected on some level (sometimes just a "gut feeling") that something was wrong. Even without specifically thinking about an affair, it's very common to sense the emotional distance from a partner who is keeping this kind of secret.

"I asked her and she said no..."

Almost universally, a person who is having affair will deny it when asked. As I've frequently pointed out, the mantra among those having affairs is "Never tell. If questioned, deny it." This denial may persist for quite some time—as described above by "She lied several times..."

"...says that she did not have any form of sex with him..."

If/when someone is lying, they most often try to avoid lying "outright" in that they will simply say they "didn't have sex" as long as they didn't have actual intercourse. In this instance, if she is lying, saying she "did not have any form of sex" is a stronger statement that indicates a willingness to lie outright.

"...they kissed, 'made out' and even took showers together ('but had their swim suites on)."

This is rationalization of the highest order—comparable to the story I heard about the man who found his wife naked with another man but claimed there "was no sex." It's typical of the way most people limit acknowledging the full degree of activities to whatever is actually known/exposed.

Frankly, all of the above rationalizations are irrelevant to the bigger question—of whether this behavior is clearly inappropriate and clearly threatening to the marriage. The answer to that is *yes*. So even *if* the above statements are technically true, it's unreasonable to say that "kissing, making out, and taking swim suite showers" is *not* an affair or *not* any form of sex.

Obviously, there needs to be a great deal more honest communication about everything related to this experience. And the communication needs to be reasonable and "rational" rather than simply "rationalizing" and saying anything to try to minimize the impact and significance of what has happened.

Can I trust my gut that he's having an affair?

Question:

I can't prove it and he always says "you have NO proof!!" but for over a year, I've had a gut, mother's instinct if you will, that he's been cheating. Sometimes it disappears but not for long...he's in denial about so much; he blames me for everything.

Peggy's Response:

"Suspecting" your spouse is having an affair—without knowing for sure—can in some ways feel even worse than actually "knowing." (Many people have said that "not knowing" is worst of all.) Personally, I spent many years wondering and debating with myself: (is he? - no he can't be - but everything points to it - but he's too smart to risk so much - I must be "crazy"). It really is a crazy-making experience because we don't want to be right; we hope against hope that we're wrong. And we may suppress our suspicions for awhile, but as described above, "sometimes it disappears but not for long..."

While there are, of course, people who are irrationally jealous and imagine things that aren't happening, in most cases when someone has a persistent gut feeling that there's an affair, it usually turns out to be correct. Almost everyone acknowledges (after the fact) that they "knew" on some level long before they "knew for sure." In fact, here's the opening line from one of my Articles posted on the website titled "Suspicions of an Affair:" "Often the first signal of an affair is a gut feeling that something is wrong."

Another of my Articles titled "Clues that your Partner is Having an Affair" talks more about the role of intuition: "The first signals of an affair are seldom the stereotypical signs we first consider. They're usually much more subtle, more of an intuitive reaction to changes in a partner's behavior—a sense that "something is different." No matter how careful a person is to hide an affair, these "clues" can't be easily concealed. The first "clue" is Pulling Away. You can sense your partner pulling away—creating an emotional distance between you (because they now need to protect a secret)."

In addition, when you point-blank ask if they're having an affair and they not only deny it but attack you, that's even stronger evidence that the accusation is correct. If someone is not having an affair, they're more likely to try to be reassuring. But when they have something to hide, they are more likely to lash out—perhaps with the idea that "the best defense is a good offense." In other words, they think that by shifting the focus to the behavior of their spouse they may be able to deflect attention from their own behavior. But unwarranted anger is simply a further indication that the accusation is probably on target.

Even if you are convinced within your own mind that they're having an affair, there's no guaranteed method for getting the spouse to admit it. Generally, they hope they can "wait it out" until you stop asking. So the approach that has the best chance of eventually leading to an admission is to make it clear that any tactics of trying to stonewall or delay or deny or debate or shift the focus will not make this issue go away. In other words making it clear that you believe they're having an affair and that you will continue to push for honestly facing this issue and dealing with it.

How can I trust him?

Question:

I believe my husband has had an affair with a co-worker. I confronted him and he denied it, yet apologized for hurting me. I only have circumstantial evidence and want to believe him, but I'm afraid I'm being made a fool. How can I put it behind and trust him?

Peggy's Response:

Many of these factors are typical of the problems that a person faces in this kind of situation: suspicions of an affair, denials when questioned, afraid of being made a fool, and wondering how to go on and trust.

It's true that many affairs start at work, so it's not unreasonable to be concerned. The fact that they are denied doesn't really prove much either way. If there is *not* an affair, then, of course, there will be denials. But if there *IS* an affair, there will almost certainly *still* be denials. As I've explained before, the norm among people involved in affairs is: "Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible."

Dealing with the uncertainty is easier (and the actions taken will be more effective) by rejecting the idea that a spouse's affair "makes you a fool." Most affairs are NOT a reflection on the spouse—even though the person having the affair will often try to *Justify* it by finding some "fault" with the marriage. But there are far more factors involved than the condition of the marriage or any perceived shortcomings of the spouse. When all is said and done, it's usually the people having affairs that are behaving "foolishly."

As for "putting it behind" and "trusting," this usually takes time *and* involves talking through the feelings and the fears. While a spouse's resistance to talking doesn't "necessarily" mean there's an affair, it does indicate an insensitivity to the feelings of anxiety and concern—which usually means there is *SOME* kind problem that needs to be addressed, whether or not it relates to an affair.

CONFRONTING

How do I confront?

Question:

I need concrete help in determining a course of action. How do I confront my husband about his affairs? ...And what if he lies?

Peggy's Response:

This is a very important question—because it's not enough to just decide to confront. "When and How" to confront are critical issues that need to be determined prior to any confrontation. *When* to confront is based on two key questions: do you really want the truth (rather than just looking for reassurance) and are you open to the possibility of either staying or leaving (without having predetermined this important decision).

As for *how* to confront, it's probably useless to ask tentative or vague questions—because there's a basic, unspoken mindset among most people having affairs: "Never tell; if questioned, deny it; if caught, say as little as possible." Therefore, it's important to begin by being very specific in asking, "Are you having an affair?" However, if the question comes as a complete surprise, it may prompt a knee-jerk denial. So for the confrontation to have any reasonable possibility of eliciting the truth, this question should not be blurted out without proper preparation.

Here's an overview of some of the ideas presented in "The Monogamy Myth:" First, it's important to choose a time and a place where there will be no intrusions or distractions. Then it's essential to establish real contact with the person; look them in the eye and say something like this: "I need an honest answer to the question I'm about to ask you. I hope the answer is no, but I need to know the truth. If the answer is 'yes,' that's not necessarily the end of the relationship. But if it's 'no' (and I find out later you were lying), I'm not sure we would be able to overcome that."

A failure to ask this kind of direct question allows the other person to avoid a direct reply. Many people having affairs depend on never being asked directly, on never having to lie. A straightforward question makes it more difficult to pretend no harm is being done and to deny the possibility of getting caught and having to deal with the consequences. Of course, even making this kind of direct effort doesn't guarantee success in getting an honest answer; some people are accomplished liars and this won't have as much impact on them. It can be extremely frustrating to finally ask directly, and still feel the truth didn't come out. It's at this point that people usually stop talking and start taking more direct action aimed at finding out the truth for themselves.

How can I confront without being accusatory?

Question:

What is the best way to confront the issue of whether your partner is having an affair without being accusatory to the point of making the partner close themselves off? What are the best questions to ask to get the most honest response?

Peggy's Response:

In general, most people who are asked about an affair try to "close themselves off"—because they don't want to have to face it or deal with it. So any effort to keep them from closing themselves off is likely to lead to asking questions that are tentative, vague, or "not accusatory"—which almost inevitably results in a denial, whether or not an affair is taking place. So unless/until there's a strong feeling of suspicion (and a willingness to make it perfectly clear that you want "the truth" instead of just "reassurance"), you're are likely to get "false reassurance."

The other most likely response (when there *is*, in fact, an affair taking place) is that vague or tentative questions become "puff-balls" that are knocked down by responding with accusations as to how you could possibly doubt/question them. And the more over-reaction there is in the response, the more likely it is that this tactic is just an effort to stop the questioning in its tracks.

If someone is honestly *not* having an affair, they're likely to want to be thoughtful and reassuring of your doubts; whereas if they *are* having an affair, they may try to make you think you're crazy for questioning them. (Of course, as mentioned above, "reassurance" is no guarantee either.) Unfortunately, this is not a clear-cut, black-and-white issue with concrete guidelines. As with many things related to affairs, it's good to pay attention to your *own* sense of what is really going on.

Should I make allowances for depression or demand the affair stop?

Question:

Spouse has been seeing a shrink for three years and is being treated for depression. Spouse has issues with me, but will not explain the "issues." Spouse initiated affair with coworker for unknown reasons. Denied affair but left obvious signs for my discovery. Now angry I've "snooped"—claims violation of trust!!! What are my options? Give allowance for illness or demand affair stop????

Peggy's Response:

In most cases, once an affair is discovered (even if it is denied), the person who had an affair tends to use any "reasonable-sounding rationalization" to explain/justify their behavior. The above question does not indicate whether the spouse in this case is claiming that the depression contributed to the affair, but the person who wrote seems to think there's a connection.

I'm not an expert on depression—but I'm unaware of any evidence that depression can "cause" a person to have an affair. (On the other hand, I am aware of instances where the deception involved in conducting a secret affair contributed to pre-existing feelings of depression.) At any rate, it's probably reasonable to deal with *both* issues simultaneously—rather than allowing the depression to interfere with facing and dealing with the affair.

The idea that the spouse is angry at the snooping (and claiming it a "violation of trust") would be funny if it weren't so ludicrous. They have already broken the trust through their deception in having an affair—so criticizing their partner for trying to *uncover* that deception is a pretty ridiculous argument. It is, however, typical of the kinds of irrational arguments people use when their affairs are discovered—aimed at deflecting attention away from *themselves* and what *they* have done.

So while it's reasonable to be considerate of a spouse's depression—or any other struggle they may be facing—it's seldom helpful (either to them or to the relationship) to let it serve as a barrier to facing and dealing with other important issues. In most cases, a failure to deal with the affair is like trying to ignore the elephant in the room; it's always there, like a heavy weight just waiting to fall. In fact, the longer the delay in dealing with affairs, the more overwhelming it may feel for everyone involved.

Regarding the initial question as to whether to "give allowance for illness or demand affair stop," it's probably better to insist on focusing on the affair—while *also* "allowing for the depression." This doesn't mean "demanding" it stop (since we can't *force* another person to change their behavior)—but it's reasonable to pursue a sensible, rational approach to discussing and working through the issues around the affair—and making it clear where *we* stand and what *we* will or won't do. Then it's up to the other person to respond in one way or the other—rather than just waiting around waiting and wondering if/when this issue will be resolved.

How can I get him to admit the truth?

Question:

My husband had an affair and doesn't want to admit the truth even after I found out I had an STD. How can I get him to admit the truth? He doesn't comfort me or even talk to me much. He acts indifferent. What should I do?

Peggy's Response:

This question (how to get the person who had an affair to talk about it) has been by far the most-asked question during the past 20 years. I've written about it many times, but will continue to address it—since it's so important.

As I've pointed out in the past, this is a deeply-ingrained position on the part of the person who had an affair. (The common "wisdom" among people having affairs is: "Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible.") So in most instances, they will try anything to avoid answering questions.

The above letter describes behavior that is "indifferent." However, the behavior could just as easily be "defensive," "attacking," "silence"—basically anything that they think might help avoid dealing with the questions.

Of course, there is no magic bullet that will get through to someone. But since they're usually hoping that the questions will eventually stop if they can only delay long enough, here are some steps that might help:

1. It might help to consistently state that this is never going to "go away" until it's discussed.
2. Another point that might help is to make it clear that rebuilding the marriage and developing trust again are determined by the degree to which this is fully discussed and dealt with.
3. It's important to use "positive reinforcement" whenever there is *any* effort to be honest. For instance, if/when they answer any question, it's important to avoid immediately "punishing" them for the answer—no matter how painful the information may be. While this is not "fair," it's essential if there's to be any hope that they will continue to talk. One way of doing this is to constantly focus on the positive aspects of their willingness to provide answers instead of focusing only on the negative aspects of whatever information is contained in the answers.
4. It helps if this is not couched in terms of a "win-lose" battle—with each person trying to "get their way." It needs to be viewed as a problem shared by the two of you—where talking through it allows for the possibility of a "win-win" situation. (Naturally, nobody feels like a "winner," no matter what happens. But an attitude of "trying to make things better" rather than just "getting your own way" may help encourage a willingness for the partner to try to talk through it.)

Finally, one caution about thinking in terms of getting "the truth." Getting actual facts (about who, when, where) are possible. But there is likely to be no absolute "truth" about such questions as "why" or "what they were thinking" at various points. At best, these are likely to be based on personal perceptions—which are determined by each person's wants, fears, expectations, past experiences, values, mindsets, etc. It's very difficult to overestimate the ability of the Power of Perception to affect our personal view.

PERSONALLY RECOVERING

How can I function when I'm so devastated?

Question:

I found out my husband had an affair 6 days ago and am devastated and unable to function. There were signs which led to snooping on my part and eventually finding the proof in the form of an email. I am devastated, unable to function, and can't get the thought of them out of my mind. We are going to seek therapy but in the meantime, how do I begin to live again? He regrets it and is doing everything to make it up to me, but so far it isn't enough. What can I do?

Peggy's Response:

This letter describes the number one issue for most people upon discovering a partner's affair: dealing with the devastation they feel. (By the way, *devastated* is the word most often used to describe these initial feelings.)

While it *feels* like the struggle is to be able to function, in fact, after only 6 days, the main challenge is to simply "survive" this difficult early period while your system (physically and emotionally) tries to adjust to the new reality of your life. Even if someone has suspected, there's still the shock to their system when they find out "for sure." So the first order of business is to take care of *yourself*—before trying to function in taking care of anything/anyone else.

Naturally, the world doesn't stop for you when you face this kind of crisis. There may be job responsibilities or child-care responsibilities that lead you to feel you *must* "function." However, this is the time to do whatever possible to reach out for help/support from others to take over as many of your responsibilities as possible while you take care of the basics of sustaining yourself. This usually involves simply being sure you eat, trying to sleep (or at least rest), and getting some exercise (don't just sit and vegetate). Also, do anything that can be stress-reducing: meditation or being out in nature or *anything* that you would normally find relaxing.

Recovering and getting beyond the impact of this experience literally takes years of actively working to understand and deal with what has happened. I do not mean this to be discouraging, but it's important to be realistic about the enormous amount of time involved in truly being able to "live again." So it's helpful not to add to your frustration by expecting too much too soon; simply knowing it takes time and working to sustain yourself during this time is the most reasonable course to follow.

What are the stages of recovery?

Question:

It's been 6 months since the discovery of my husband's 2-year affair with a woman in the community, and a one night stand on a business trip. He's broken all ties with the other woman and answers all my questions. I've felt guilty, sad, angry these past 6 months. What are the stages of recovery for the betrayed given husband's commitment to the marriage?

Peggy's Response:

While it would be comforting to think there were specific stages of recovery (each lasting a specific length of time), it's actually much more complex than that. All the emotions mentioned above (guilt, sadness, anger) are absolutely typical. So are feelings such as shock, denial, depression, grief, anxiety, defensiveness, pain, resentment, loss, loneliness, fear, and helplessness.

Having said that, I do recognize some general stages that most people go through when experiencing the loss of something that is very important to their sense of themselves and their place in the world.

Here are the stages we describe in our handbook, "Recovering from Affairs:"

Shock—the disruption of the world as you know it.

Whether or not you suspected the affair before finding out about it, there's the shock of actually knowing "for sure."

Holding on—the attempt to maintain the old situation, the not letting go.

This can take the form of denial or simply an unwillingness to deal with this significant change in your life. You may feel in limbo, unable to go back but unwilling to move forward.

Acknowledgment—giving up, yielding to what is.

Only when you reach this point can you even begin to deal with the situation. At this point your thinking becomes possible, allowing you to get out from under being totally ruled by your emotions.

Adaptation and change—establishing a new world and a sense of worth.

This is the true "recovery" period. So you can see that recovery does not begin right away. The first steps must be gotten through before recovery can be undertaken. The key is to get to this point of beginning the recovery as soon as possible.

(end of excerpt)

The situation described in this letter indicates two of the most critical factors that *allow* for this recovery process to work: "He's broken all ties with the other woman and answers all my questions." So now it just takes time. As I've often said, the process of recovery takes more time than anyone wants to consider (at *least* 2 years even when effectively working toward recovery). So 6 months is a reasonable point where the *real* recovery can begin. Prior to that, most people are still coming to grips with accepting this new reality of their lives.

What are the stages of dealing with affairs?

Question:

My psychiatrist told me there are 5 stages, I can only remember 4 and not the exact order: anger, denial, sadness and acceptance. What is the missing one and what is the correct order?

Peggy's Response:

There is no one set of stages for dealing with affairs. The above group sounds like it's based on the classic stages of dealing with death/dying as presented by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. While these were specifically developed to describe the stages of dealing with death, they apply to dealing with any kind of loss.

There is certainly a great sense of loss when dealing with an affair—which involves the loss of your image of your spouse, your marriage, even your world. Nothing is as it once seemed. In fact, any loss of this kind has been referred to as a "little death."

Anyway, here are the stages in the order developed by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross:

Denial: Being unable to admit they might die and/or suffer the loss death represents.

Anger: Projecting the pain of the loss onto others.

Bargaining: Representing a last effort at avoiding death by "earning" longer life.

Depression: When the full impact of imminent death strikes them.

Acceptance: Coming to grips with the fact of coming death and making preparation for it.

It's important to realize that any description of the stages in dealing with affairs is only a general representation of the general factors involved. In fact, people tend to go through a series of stages—and not in a fixed order. They may go back and forth, skip about or have periods where the stages seem to overlap, all according to their particular needs.

Nothing about dealing with affairs is as neat and precise as might be desired. So any list of stages does not describe an absolute step-by-step process. An awareness of these stages is helpful only as one of many tools that can be helpful in dealing with affairs.

How can we get through the initial pain?

Question:

I cheated on my wife with an escort, and I told her about it the next day. This has been a very painful experience for both of us. Any advice on getting through the initial pain so that we both can function during the day? She's so angry she won't talk to me or do anything perceived as "nice" or helpful.

Peggy's Response:

First, the fact that the affair was immediately, voluntarily disclosed indicates a desire to take responsibility and do whatever it takes to recover and rebuild the relationship. However, as acknowledged in the question, this is a "very painful experience" for everyone involved. And the writer is correct in recognizing that the first task is simply to reach the point of being able to "function during the day." (People are not fully capable of dealing with the situation until they have first been able to absorb the physical impact of this experience.)

In fact, here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that describes this very common problem:

The immediate challenge for most people is simply getting through each day. In many instances, people feel so weak and depressed that they find it difficult to function. They sometimes isolate themselves from the rest of life, as if nothing else exists. They lose interest in their job, their family, and their outside activities.

Unfortunately, this happens just as they need a great deal of energy to cope with the issues they face. They can't begin to recover until they get enough physical strength and vitality to sustain them through this period of emotional devastation. Most people fail to appreciate the importance of taking care of the basics: exercise, nutrition, and relaxation.

--Exercise is one of the best sources of energy—and one of the more effective ways to deal with overwhelming emotions. (People) usually feel listless and depressed, and the last thing they want to do is exercise, but they need to get out and start moving as soon as possible.

--Nutrition is another basic problem for people who are dealing with the stress of an affair. The impact of stress on the body is widely known, and this is certainly a time of intense stress in the lives of most people. Because of that stress, the immune system is weakened and there's more susceptibility to sicknesses of all kinds. That's why it's all the more important that nutrition not be overlooked.

--Relaxation is another important factor in dealing with the stress of this situation. But most people look for ways to escape the reality by turning to alcohol, drugs, tranquilizers ... or just sitting like a zombie in front of the television set. Unfortunately, these do nothing to diminish their stress, increase their energy, or improve their self-esteem. Instead, these activities usually make their lives even more difficult.

(end of excerpt from "The Monogamy Myth")

So while it may seem overly simple to focus on these "basics" (exercise, nutrition, relaxation), it's not until steps are taken to assure physical survival that you can get beyond the emotional stress that interferes with being about to think clearly enough to effectively deal with the situation. Unfortunately, there's no way to avoid the initial pain and the problems in functioning during this period of trying to come to grips with this new "reality." So it's best to avoid making any critical decisions during this time and to be as patient and understanding as possible, looking toward the time when you both sense that you'll "survive" and can begin the long process of recovery.

Will antidepressants help the grief or just cover it up?

Question:

I have read that 2 years is a good estimate for recovery from a spouse's affair. Do you think that pursuing a course of antidepressants might help with the extreme grief, or will they just cover up feelings that have to be dealt with eventually?

Peggy's Response:

I'm well aware that many people struggling with the emotional devastation of learning of a partner's affair do take antidepressants. (I must say that so many people take antidepressants that I often wonder how much individual assessment is being made in determining the appropriateness in any given situation.) But I'm in no position to make this kind of judgment. A decision as to whether or not to take antidepressants needs to be determined by each individual in consultation with a professional who is qualified to prescribe this medication.

The aspect of this situation that I can address is the general question of "having to deal with the feelings eventually." The short answer is yes, they will still have to be dealt with at some point, regardless of whether or not antidepressants are used in the interim. And while antidepressants don't eliminate the need to still eventually deal with the feelings, for some people they may be helpful in getting through the initial period of shock and disorientation, making it more tolerable.

The general pattern is that for the first 6 months or so, most people are simply trying to "survive," basically dealing with the physical impact of the emotional upheaval. The most that can reasonably be accomplished during this period is to deal with issues related to being able to eat, sleep and function. "Dealing with the extreme grief" has to wait until there's enough strength to do that. So, with or without antidepressants, these feelings can usually only really begin to be effectively dealt with after a period of time has passed.

Thinking that taking antidepressants somehow short-circuits the need to eventually deal with strong feelings ascribes more power to the antidepressants than is warranted. But while antidepressants don't speed up the time needed to begin to effectively deal with these feelings, they may help make that period more tolerable. As I said earlier, this determination needs to be made on a case-by-case basis by a qualified person after individual assessment.

When will it get better?

Question:

My husband had an affair that I found out about last year. I am having a very hard time with the idea that he was physically intimate with somebody else. What can I do, will this get any better?

Peggy's Response:

When people are in pain over a partner's affair—it feels like it will never end. The thoughts, memories, or "flashbacks" to a time when our spouse was intimate with someone else is an inevitable part of the process. And while we can't *prevent* these thoughts from coming, we *can* make a difference both in their strength and their duration—if we refuse to feed the thoughts when they do come.

There's an old saying that "what you feed is what grows." So when these thoughts come, if you give in to them, go over and over the incident in your head, dwell and obsess about it for quite awhile—it only grows stronger. (Actually, reviewing a bad scene repeatedly in your head allows it to have the same physical/emotional impact as if it's actually happening again. The brain doesn't make a clear differentiation.)

Instead, when the thoughts come, you can deliberately focus on shifting your thoughts away toward whatever (anything) more positive about your current life or the prospects for the future. Of course, this is not magic and won't "work" the first time—but consistently shifting away instead of going deeper into the thoughts will gradually rob them of their power to create pain.

Frankly, while the image of your spouse being intimate with someone else is a real nightmare for most people, especially in the beginning... over the long haul, most people report that they recover from the fact that their spouse had sex with someone else before they recover from the fact that they were deceived. So while time alone won't make it get better, actively working toward that time can certainly help move the process along.

How can I stop blaming myself?

Question:

I feel so stupid. I ignored all of the warnings, my intuition.....I believed every lie. For a year I wondered what was going on but I had blind faith in my husband. I ask myself over and over again ... "why didn't I do this or that"... How can I stop blaming myself for allowing it to continue unchallenged. I feel crushed by the lies and deceit and my own stupidity!

Peggy's Response:

First of all, *any* particular way a person might react to this general situation is *not* stupid. What we label as "stupid" is sometimes a subconscious way of coping with a situation we're simply not ready to deal with. For instance, we often "believe" what we want/need to believe—whether or not, on some level, we know it isn't true. It's a kind of protection during a time we feel unable/unwilling to really *know*.

I'm very familiar with this process because I spent many years "ignoring all of the warnings and my intuition" about my husband's affairs. I'm an otherwise intelligent woman, but I simply wasn't prepared to face (and more importantly, to deal with) the reality of what was happening. So I kept trying to find ways to refute the obvious signs.

As to "why we don't do this or that," most of us do whatever we *can* do—when we can do it—and not before. Blaming ourselves for our "stupidity" just "adds insult to injury" in that we don't need any extra burdens to deal with in coping with the lies and deceit. (Actually, one of the reasons we blame ourselves may be to somehow diminish the intense focus on our painful feelings about the lies and deceit.)

The bottom line is that there's no legitimate reason to blame ourselves for whatever way we react to or deal with the initial anxiety/confusion/fear that accompanies this kind of situation. And focusing on "if only..." or "what if..." simply distracts from dealing with "what is." All our energy is needed to deal with the reality of the situation now and making good decisions about the future—rather than staying caught up in what we did or didn't do in the past.

How can I get control of my emotions?

Question:

How can I keep myself from destroying us with bitterness? It has been seven months since I discovered his affair but every time we have an argument, I still throw it in his face. I go from calm to out of control in 30 seconds!

Peggy's Response:

This is such a common problem—and it's so frustrating to feel out-of-control, especially when you know on some level that you're sabotaging your desire to recover and to heal. While we can't necessarily *prevent* or *avoid* having strong emotions in the first place—whether or not we *stay* under their control depends on what we do next.

When faced with strong emotions, if we dwell on the emotions and go over and over the thoughts that trigger the emotions, it reinforces their strength and power. But if we consciously, deliberately try to engage our brains in more rational *thinking*, we can gradually offset the power of the emotions. Little by little, we become able to control our emotions instead of having them control us. This is a very long process; it takes a *lot* of time and practice. This is a dilemma for almost everybody who finds themselves in this situation.

In fact, here's an excerpt from "The Monogamy Myth" where I wrote about my own effort to overcome my strong emotional reactions with more rational understandings.

I know from my own experience that it is possible to recover from a mate's affair. I understand how it feels in the beginning when you're overwhelmed with fear and pain. When I first became suspicious that James was having affairs, I didn't think I'd be able to survive if it were true. My emotions were very much in control with almost no perspective to offset them. I honestly felt at that time that my life was ruined.

I gradually came to realize that I wasn't alone, either in my experience or in my personal interpretation of it. As my understanding of affairs grew stronger, my self-esteem grew stronger as well. It felt a little like a see-saw, as I gradually shifted from being controlled by my emotions to being able to rationally understand what had happened.

This process involved years of talking about my experience with a great many people and reading everything I could find about the subject of affairs. Gradually, its grip on me loosened and then slipped away one day when I didn't even notice. There was no great moment of truth when I knew I was over the hump. It was a very slow process of turning it inside out and upside down until I had control of it instead of it having control over me.

This is a common dilemma for many people—getting enough understanding to overpower their emotions. Often they are able to accept and understand what has happened intellectually long before they recover emotionally. One person talked about sounding very reasonable and rational on the outside while dying inside from feelings of hurt and anger.

I can honestly say that I never get emotionally stirred up and upset anymore about my husband's affairs, and I don't think I could have reached this point without deliberately talking about and dealing with the issue. I don't think I'm unique. I'm no more forgiving or understanding or strong or unemotional than anyone else. But I licked these emotions, and I believe anyone can. In fact, not only is it possible for a person to recover from this experience, but it's also possible for them to come out of it with a greater sense of self-worth than before it happened.

(end of excerpt from The Monogamy Myth)

How can I stop thinking about his affair?

Question:

It has been 7 months and I am still crying. How can I stop thinking about my husband's affair. I still love him very much and don't want to leave him—but I just can't stop thinking about what he did.

Peggy's Response:

This problem of "thinking about what he did" is quite common. It takes time to get to the point of diminishing those automatic images. Of course, time alone won't do it, but time spent rebuilding the primary connection and replacing those painful images with some new, more positive ones "together" can gradually allow them to recede into the background.

There's really no way to "stop thinking" in the sense of "preventing" the images from coming in the first place. But each time they come, there can be an effort to deliberately move away from dwelling on them—as opposed to the tendency to be obsessed with them. (For those who have tried meditation, this process works much the same way as meditation.) It's important to be gentle with yourself—accepting that the thoughts will come, but noticing when they do and moving away from them as soon as possible.

It's also important to deliberately think about various aspects of the affair at times when there's an ability to actually do more "thinking" instead of being blindsided by unexpected thoughts that trigger such strong emotions. Gradually, the negative thoughts will come less often and be less intense. There's no magic bullet to stopping the negative thoughts, but this slow process of gradually overcoming them can eventually make it possible to think about the affair without so many painful feelings.

How can I recover when divorce results?

Question:

How does a spouse recover from the aftermath of an affair when divorce results? After 9 months since the discovery of the affair, my spouse refused to sever all contact with the third party; unwilling to answer any of my questions and would not accept responsibility for the devastation the affair caused in our lives. Due to his unwillingness to work at the marriage, I have filed for divorce. I want to obtain emotional closure but having no answers keeps the wound open.

Peggy's Response:

The above letter describes a divorce due to the spouse's failure to address the basic factors involved in "rebuilding the marriage:" refusing to sever contact with the third party, being unwilling to questions, and not accepting responsibility.

However, recovery takes two forms: there's personally recovering from the emotional impact of the experience—and then there's "rebuilding the marriage." These are two completely different kinds of recovery.

Some people who stay married make a good personal recovery, overcoming the emotional damage and renewing their commitment to the relationship. But many others who stay married never recover emotionally. They spend the rest of their lives bitter and resentful, and the relationship remains strained and distant. The same is true for those who get out of the relationship. Some make a good recovery and go on to form a more satisfying relationship with someone else. And some never recover, carrying the emotional burden with them into whatever relationships they have in the future—or perhaps even avoiding any future involvements.

Reaching personal recovery involves learning as much as possible about affairs in general. This helps to "depersonalize" the experience to some degree (despite how intensely personal it feels). It involves gradually getting enough information and perspective to be able to have a more rational understanding of the experience to counter the strong emotional reaction.

This involves deliberately focusing on the subject—turning it inside out and upside down until you have control of it instead of it having control of you. And even then, there's still a gap between intellectually understanding it and emotionally integrating the new reality into your life and your sense of yourself in order to *fully* recover.

Is it harder to recover from an affair with a friend?

Question:

Is it harder for a spouse to get over an affair that was with his best friend, we all went to the same church, the spouse found out from the unfaithful husband's wife, and it happened within 6 months of the marriage? Is it impossible for a spouse to recover with the aforementioned information even if the unfaithful spouse has answered his questions, severed the 3rd party relationship? Would it have been easier for a spouse to recover if it was just a one-night stand versus it being a 6 months affair?

Peggy's Response:

There are a number of questions contained in this letter. But to address the last one first...

When thinking about affairs from the "outside" (not the person experiencing a partner's affair), it would seem that the degree of difficulty in dealing with it would fall along a continuum. That is to say that an internet affair (not involving sexual contact) might be the least difficult, a one-night stand somewhat more difficult, a longer-term affair more difficult still, an affair with a friend or family member even more difficult, and multiple affairs over many years perhaps the most difficult of all.

However, that is *not* the way it feels when it happens to you! Since you have to deal with whatever your particular situation may be, to you it seems extremely difficult, regardless of the specifics of the situation. (I've seen many people be just as devastated over a one-night stand as someone else may be over something seemingly more difficult.)

The best way to understand the consistency of the difficulty, despite the differences in the situation, is to recognize that in all cases there has been a tremendous deception. It's this deception that makes it all so devastating. As I've explained before, while the sexual situation may get the most attention in the beginning, in the long-term, people recover from the fact their partner had sex with someone else before they recover from the fact that they were deceived.

The universal reaction is that (despite the differences in specific experiences), your world has been changed. Your spouse is not who you thought they were, your marriage isn't what you thought it was...your world isn't what you thought it was. This is the root of the degree of devastation felt by so many people, regardless of their individual stories.

As for the other significant question contained in the above letter, whether it's impossible for a spouse to recover when...(fill in the blanks). The answer is Yes. It's always possible. That's because recovery is more closely associated with the prospects for the future of the relationship than with what happened in the past. The only thing that could prevent this from being possible is if someone is convinced that it's impossible to recover. Believing it's possible is one of the keys to recovery.

What have I done to be treated this way?

Question:

My husband had an affair with my "former" best friend. I always trusted him and felt so comfortable with our trust. Also, it was such a shock to be so betrayed by her, she knew how much I love him. I cannot understand what I have done to be treated this way. I am devastated for the fact that my family and marriage has been torn apart, they are the most important part of my life.

Peggy's Response:

First of all, the devastation is understandable—because this is a life-altering experience. As is so clearly expressed by this reader, it's more than just the affair (as if that weren't enough). It's also the loss of the world as you knew it. Your spouse is not who you thought he was; your marriage is not what you thought it was; and in this case, your friend is not who you thought she was. The bottom line is that your world is not the way you thought it was—and this can indeed be devastating.

While there is no way to "compare" the degree of pain involved in various kinds of affairs, most people recognize the double-whammy when the affair partner is also a friend. Dealing with the deception by both your spouse and your friend can be especially disturbing.

However, the saddest part of this is that there's a tendency for a person in this situation to blame themselves. Note her statement: *"I cannot understand what I have done to be treated this way."* As hard as it is for a person to believe it when they're in the midst of the pain of these feelings, it seldom has anything to do with whatever they have (or haven't) done. The tendency to think it's "my fault" is quite common—and quite wrong. The reasons for affairs are complex. There is never just one simple reason.

How do you deal with multiple indiscretions?

Question:

How do you deal with multiple indiscretions when you find out about them all at once?

Peggy's Response:

While "dealing with multiple indiscretions" is, of course, a significant issue, this question seems to be focused primarily on the issue of "finding out about them all at once." So I'll comment on both points.

First, most people think (in the abstract) that dealing with multiple indiscretions would be *much* more difficult than dealing with a single affair, which in turn would be more difficult than dealing with a one-night stand, etc. (We tend to think in terms of some kind of continuum where one is worse than the other.)

However, when you're actually dealing with a partner's affair, you can be just as devastated (no matter what kind of affair, who it was with, how long it lasted or how many partners) as someone else who is dealing with a different situation. That's because when it's *you*, whatever you're dealing with feels as bad as it can feel; you have no basis for comparing it to how something else would feel. Through the years I have seen people be just as devastated by an "emotional affair" that didn't involve sex as someone else was by a sexual affair. That's because, as I've mentioned before, it's the "deception" that is the most difficult to deal with and recover from—regardless of any other factors.

As for the blow of "finding out all at once" that there were multiple affairs—again, this may *seem* to be the worst thing to deal with. But, in fact, it appears to be much more difficult for people to deal with the situation when they initially think there's only one or two affairs—only to learn (sometimes years later) that there were multiple affairs. When that happens, they're thrown right back down to ground zero to start all over in their efforts to deal with the situation.

So I'm not saying someone should be "thankful" at learning of multiple affairs all at once—because certainly that is extremely difficult. But it is clear that it is *not* easier to find out about multiple affairs in some way *other than* all at once—and, in fact, may even be worse.

The bottom line is that the shock, disappointment, and pain of learning of a partner's affair (or affairs) is always going to be difficult. The challenge for recovering is quite similar for everyone who faces any form of this situation, regardless of the specifics involved. But the more you learn about this issue, the better you are able to take charge of your own recovery.

How could he have had an affair?

Question:

I have an extraordinary situation. I found out my husband had an affair, and I was so crushed, humiliated and in pain that at first I kept it to myself. Then when I finally told him I knew, he flatly denied it. I am having a very difficult time understanding this. The pain is so great that I have lost a great deal of weight in the last month since I've known. I've seen a therapist that has helped a lot, but how do I ever get over the pain of the betrayal? This is so out of character for him that I am at a loss as to what to do. How can I get the marriage on the right track, and how can I ever trust him again?

Peggy's Response:

The situation described in this letter understandably feels "extraordinary," (and it IS extraordinary to the person who is dealing with it)—but having heard the personal stories of thousands of people during the past 25 years, this situation is extremely typical. While there's far more involved than can be adequately addressed in a short response, I'll try to cover a few key points that might be helpful to anyone in this situation:

1. Being "crushed, humiliated and in pain" are almost always the reactions to learning of a partner's affair (even if there had been a suspicion beforehand, but even moreso if there was no suspicion). The most common word used is "devastation."
2. "Flatly denying" the affair and "not communicating about the affair" are also quite common. There's an unwritten rule among people having affairs: *"Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible."* (The common reasons/excuses for not talking are listed and discussed in "The Monogamy Myth.")
3. "Having a difficult time understanding this" is also predictable (and understandable) because it doesn't "make sense." (People having affairs tend to rationalize their behavior in order to feel OK about themselves.)
4. Losing a lot of weight is also typical. In fact, the struggle to deal with the physical impact of the pain and sense of loss is the first major hurdle for most people. (It's sheer survival!)
5. Seeing a therapist can help, but getting over the sense of betrayal and learning to trust again takes a lot of time and work. It can't be rushed. Some key factors are: willingness to answer questions, hanging in through the inevitable emotional impact, and severing contact with the third party. (These are not absolute, but usually indicate a willingness to resolve this issue instead of trying to bury it alive, where it just keeps coming back.)

Will the pain ever go away?

Question:

It has been two years since my husband had an affair with one of his coworkers. After some counseling, we were doing just great; however, it continues to haunt me that it even happened. Is this normal? Will the pain ever go away? I am trying to be patient, but I want it to go away soon!

Peggy's Response:

This is a very common lament, "I want it to go away soon!" Understandably neither partner wants to drag this out, but it just doesn't work that way. While time alone won't do it, it does require committing a lot of time to working through this experience and establishing a new relationship for the future. This can't be done in days, weeks, or months; it usually takes years. But when both parties are committed to putting in the time and effort required to deal with this experience in a constructive way, it is possible to finally overcome the pain. It doesn't happen by trying to "forget the past and go on with our lives." It depends on getting more understanding and perspective—both about your own situation and about affairs in general.

While it's a struggle to overcome the pain and get over all this, the slowness of the process can be more tolerable when there's an appreciation of the fact that the effort is not *just* to get over the past but to create a better future in the process. I know from my own experience that this can happen. While I would never have voluntarily chosen to go through this crisis in order to develop a better relationship, it helps to be aware that this result is possible. And in the meantime, the slowness of the process can be handled easier by "accepting" that it will be slow, thus avoiding the frustration that is inevitable when there are unreasonable expectations about how long it will take.

Is it normal to feel worse?

Question:

It is almost one year since discovery of my husband's long term affair. Upon discovery, I was traumatized but maintained a loving relationship with him. However, now I feel less traumatized, but cold and bitter about the whole thing. I thought I should be getting better not worse. Is this normal?

Peggy's Response:

As to whether the feelings as described above are "normal"—they're normal in the sense that they're perfectly understandable, and even common, but not necessarily "expected." Also, related to "definitions," it's not necessarily "worse" to undergo this kind of shift in feelings.

Regardless of whatever feelings are experienced, the key is what can be done to better understand the feelings so they can be used in a constructive way. In this instance, it's possible that the shift from feeling "traumatized" to feeling "cold and bitter" may represent a shift from feeling "weak" and/or "dependent" to feelings more "capable" and "independent."

For instance, feeling traumatized is an understandable first "shock" reaction that may lead to thinking "How could you"—whereas feeling cold and bitter may relate to a growing sense of self-esteem, leading to thinking "How dare you." If so, this newfound strength can be used to do the kind of hard work that helps in effectively dealing with this issue—not just trying to set it aside and go on.

Naturally, giving in to the cold and bitter feelings and letting them grow/fester will only hurt in the long run. But the energy from the strength that may underlie those feelings can be a good tool for addressing the whole situation in a more productive way. And sometimes it takes a year to get to the point of getting beyond "if only..." to the full realization that "this has happened" and now I need to deal with it.

In a case like the one described in this letter, the loving relationship that existed during the "traumatized" state is likely to still be there—just currently hidden due to the shift in finally realizing that this is now a whole new relationship with a whole new challenge ahead. This is the kind of point where couples can really begin the work of re-framing their relationship into one built on fairness, equality, and honesty—leading to a much better relationship than one based ONLY on "loving feelings."

Why do I still feel so sad?

Question:

I've been through the intense anger about my husband's affair. Now I am going around teary-eyed, thinking about the good time we had. All these memories are flooding me, and the sadness is coming with them. Where is the sadness coming from?

Peggy's Response:

While I can't know the source of a specific person's feelings of sadness, there are some general understandings that might be helpful. First of all, feelings of sadness (even grieving) are not surprising when you realize that it's not *just* the issue of dealing with a partner's affair—as if that weren't enough. This is a "life-altering event" in that you're also dealing with the awareness that *your partner is not who you thought they were, your relationship is not what you thought it was—your whole world is not what you thought it was*. Deception and then revelation are extremely powerful because they shake up everything you *thought* you "knew." Now you're in essence "starting over" to rebuild your image of your life and your world.

Another key part of the sadness, grieving for many people is that they have a hard time reaching the point of actually "accepting/accommodating" to the new reality. They stay stuck in thoughts of "if only... or why me?" Coming to grips with the fact that *this* new situation is the reality (not whatever you "wish" had been the case) is a difficult process, and the sadness/grieving is often associated with the process of giving up that lost dream of "what might have been."

Naturally, no one likes feeling sad, but thinking you "shouldn't" feel sad may just add to the sense of sadness. It's helpful to recognize that feelings of sadness and grieving are normal and understandable, especially during the initial period when you're still trying to fully acknowledge this new reality and beginning to try to integrate it into your newly revised view of life.

How can I get it out of my mind?

Question:

My wife had an affair some years ago—but I can not get it out of my mind. I am devastated, and it is still painful to this day. Is there a way to get it out of my mind?

Peggy's Response:

This is a very common problem—and "devastated" is the single most common word people use to describe their feelings. The idea that the feelings of devastation can last for *years* seems unbelievable to someone who hasn't "been there." However, it's been my observation that people usually can't "get it out of their minds" unless they feel the issue has been fully dealt with. That means that they have gotten some understandings that help them make sense of what has happened.

It usually begins with wanting/needing "answers" to some of their questions about what happened. Even if the answers aren't "satisfactory" (or the facts are very painful), almost nothing seems to be as difficult to deal with as "Not Knowing!" In the absence of "knowing," most people can't "get it out of their mind"—which is understandable because their mind is trying "fill in the blanks" about all the questions and uncertainties as to what happened/why/what can be done about it, etc.

Also, overcoming the pain often depends on whether you're able to get more understanding and perspective about affairs in general (and hopefully about your own experience in particular). Without getting the kind of information that helps make sense of something that seems "crazy," the pain just continues and the thoughts continue to run around in your head. So it's important to realize that there's no length of time by which it will spontaneously cease to be a problem. No matter how long it has been, it's still important to read and talk and use as much rational effort as possible to offset the mental and emotional turmoil that doesn't simply go away on its own.

What can I do since I still get depressed after 7 months?

Question:

My husband had an emotional affair. His secretary became his confidant and intimate friend. Gradually sexy e-mails and private meetings entered the relationship. I found out. He ended the relationship and we're committed to our marriage. Now, I'm growing weary after 7 months. You say it can take 2 years. We've talked it all out, been to counseling, worked on our own relationship. My husband has been there for me in the hard times, yet I still get depressed. What can I do now?

Peggy's Response:

While it's understandable to wish that after 7 months it would be "over" (especially when both people are "doing all the right things"), it **STILL** takes time. The reference to it taking 2 years to get beyond the emotional impact shows a recognition of the fact that it takes a long time, but there's still a desire to somehow short-circuit the process. In fact, the "2 years" only reflects the time-frame when there is the kind of positive effort described above; without it, no amount of time will matter.

Frankly, when a couple is making the kind of effort described above, it's not a matter of doing something more or something different. It's simply a matter of continuing to do these things for a longer time. That's because it's very hard to completely get beyond thinking "if only" or "what if"—and fully accept the new "reality" of your life. It takes time to assimilate everything that has happened.

As I've explained in the past, one reason it takes so long and is so difficult to make this adjustment is because we feel that not only is our spouse not who we thought they were, but our marriage isn't what we thought it was—that indeed our world is not as we thought it was. So we literally have to reconstruct the world as we know it, and that takes time.

Naturally, since it's so painful/uncomfortable/depressing to continue to struggle, there's a desire (on the part of both people) to get past this more quickly. But it can help you be more patient when you recognize that this is simply the nature of the process of fully dealing with and recovering from this "life-altering experience." And in the meantime, you can help the process by avoiding "getting depressed at being depressed"—understanding that your discouragement at the amount of time required is not based on realistic expectations.

Is it common to need time alone during recovery?

Question:

It's been over a year since the discovery of my husband's long term affair. We've done counseling and learned to communicate more honestly. At this time, I'm still confused as to my feelings about the marriage since his affair. I feel I need time to myself to sort through my feelings and have asked him to leave for a month. Is this a common feeling during recovery? I love him, but am still very angry about his betrayal.

Peggy's Response:

This situation of "confused feelings about the marriage," "needing time to myself..." etc., is extremely common. We tend to believe that after a year since discovery we should have it all settled in our minds—especially when we clearly still "love him."

As I've said many times, this whole process takes much longer than anyone wants it to take or believes it should take. There are no short-cuts, and anyone who too quickly thinks they're "over it" is probably kidding themselves and just engaging in wishful thinking.

To illustrate the common experience of so many of us, here's an excerpt from "Beyond Affairs," the book James and I wrote about our experience.

This yo-yo up and down in my ability to cope with his affairs continued to keep me off balance for two or three years. There were times when things would be great and I'd think I was over the hump and had adjusted. Then...Bam! I'd get knocked all the way back down into a depression.

I frequently wished I could have amnesia. That seemed to be the only way I could forget the past. Also, I wished for time to pass. I'd always heard that time heals, but I never heard just how much time it takes. I didn't know whether I could last long enough.

One of my fantasies was to suspend my life with James for about five years while I got over the past—and then pick it up again. This was impossible, of course, but it would have been my ideal solution to the dilemma I felt about continuing with our marriage... What I really wanted was for it "never to have happened." I was tired of trying to deal with it.

(end of excerpt from Beyond Affairs)

This feeling of needing to avoid/escape/run-away-from this dilemma is not realistically going to go away until we once-and-for-all accept the reality that this has happened—and that nothing is going to change that fact. And, as I said earlier, coming to this point takes a lot of time. Until then, we can't fully focus on the future and how to use this crisis to forge a better, closer, more honest relationship—but that is the ultimate goal.

For more about this, see the following Articles posted on the Website:

Affairs: a Life-altering Experience

The Long Road to Recovery

What if the spouse who had the affair leaves?

Question:

What if the spouse who had the affair doesn't want to save the marriage and leaves? How does the hurt spouse recover and move forward? How long does it take for the pain to go away?

Peggy's Response:

The above question contains three different questions, so I'll address each one separately.

1. What if the spouse who had the affair doesn't want to save the marriage and leaves?

We tend to assume that the "hurt" spouse is the one most likely to decide to leave. However, it's not unusual for the person who had the affair to be the one who decides to leave. (In fact, it's not uncommon for a woman to learn only after her husband leaves that he had been having an affair. And in some cases, she might never have known except that he moved in with the other woman before the divorce was final.)

A more common reason (when it's the person who had the affair who leaves) is that they can't see how they can live with the consequences of their actions over the long haul. They fear that their spouse will never forgive them, will always hold it over the head, and will punish them forever. It seems hopeless, so they just get out without really trying.

Regardless of the reason for leaving, the spouse who gets left needs to deal with whatever bitterness they may feel about marriage. It may be tempting to lose faith in love and marriage altogether, but this would be a great loss. Instead, this can be turned into a learning experience to enter into any future relationships with much more realistic notions than may have been the case in the beginning.

2. How does the hurt spouse recover and move forward?

First, it's important to understand that personally recovering from this experience is *not* determined by whether or not the marriage survives. (Some people stay married and recover, and some don't recover. Some leave and recover, and some don't recover.)

Here are some key steps involved in Personal Recovery:

- Accepting the fact that it happened (no more "if only..." or "why me?")
- Understanding the complex reasons for affairs (not just "personal failure").
- Deliberately focusing on dealing with it and talking openly about what happened.
- Allowing time to heal.
- Believing it's possible to recover.

3. How long does it take for the pain to go away?

As noted in the list of keys to personal recovery, it takes "time to heal." There is no precise amount of time—because it greatly depends on the other items on the above list of keys to recovery. Without "accepting the fact that it happened," "deliberately focusing on dealing with it," and "believing it's possible to recover"—no amount of time will be sufficient. But with this kind of effort, it usually takes 2 to 3 years to be able to have the thoughts about this experience without the pain.

How do I forget and move on?

Question:

After my boyfriend returned from Japan, he admitted to being unfaithful. I am now faced with thoughts and visions of him being with another woman. How do I forget this and move on without it hurting our relationship. I want it to work and so does he and he's very sorry for what happened.

Peggy's Response:

"Forgetting" a partner's affair is an unrealistic (impossible) goal—since there's no way to avoid thinking about it in the future. (Fortunately, it isn't necessary to "forget.") The realistic goal is to get to the point where thinking about it no longer carries the kind of pain and distress currently being felt. That can only happen by taking the considerable time and energy required to get more information, understanding and perspective about the whole issue of affairs—as well as talking through all the feelings about this experience and committing to ongoing honest communication about all important aspects of the relationship.

Also, it's unrealistic to think in terms of "moving on without it hurting our relationship"—in that this kind of experience does "hurt the relationship" in the short-term. But the way you both deal with it determines the long-term impact on the relationship. As with any crisis, it is possible to learn from the experience in a way that allows you to build an even better relationship than before. For more perspective about this, see: [Life Crises...](#)

Finally, in dealing with the "thoughts and visions of him being with another woman"—I've already written an article that addresses this issue. See the Article posted on the Website titled "[Triggers - Images, Memories, Flashbacks.](#)"

How long does it take to recover?

Question:

I have read the posts on recovering from an affair where you said that it takes time, but not time alone. I have been dealing with this since childhood. My Dad did it, and both of my husbands have done it. How long does recovery take in a case like this?

Peggy's Response:

As I've described in the past, personal recovery depends on a number of factors—only one of which is time. In fact, the main point about time is that the minimum amount of time involved in completely recovering from this experience is generally about two years. However, there is no maximum time to recover—in that some people may never recover if they fail to actively do the things involved in recovering.

Basically, the necessary steps to recovery include:

- Accepting the fact that it happened. This doesn't mean liking it; it just means giving up focusing on "if only" and dealing with "what is." (Thinking in terms of "Why me?" works against recovery. This experience is simply not as unusual, unique, or "personal" as it feels. Affairs are extremely prevalent, so no one is immune from being touched by affairs.)
- Getting more understanding of affairs in general (rather than simply accepting the many erroneous "assumptions" about affairs), which involves also understanding the societal factors that contribute to affairs.
- Talking about what happened—not just for the sake of talking, but in order to move the process along—since if something is seen as "too awful to talk about," it's likely to be seen as "too awful to get over."
- Deliberately focusing on dealing with it.
- Believing it's possible to recover.

So in reflecting on the comment contained in the question: "I have been dealing with this since childhood"—it's important to explore just what has been involved in "dealing with it." Unless this has included the factors listed above, there may not have been much real recovery. But it's never too late to begin the process of genuinely recovering from this painful experience.

Will my pain ever go away?

Question:

Will my pain ever go away? He cheated and lied and was so mean for a month. He has been amazing ever since I found out, but my pain is just getting worse. I can't stop thinking about it no matter how hard I try.

Peggy's Response:

I've responded to this specific question in the past, but it's one that is asked quite frequently. The intensity of the pain can feel intolerable, especially after some period of time has passed and it seems to be getting worse instead of better. But recovering from the pain takes a lot of time, time spent getting more understanding and perspective, both about your own situation and about affairs in general.

This can't be done in days, weeks, or months; it usually takes years. But when both parties are committed to putting in the time and effort required to deal with this experience in a constructive way, it is possible to finally overcome the pain. (The fact that this letter describes a spouse who is being "amazing" since finding out bodes well for being able to work together to deal with this experience—and thus with the pain.)

While there may always be a degree of sadness that this ever happened, it is clearly possible to get past the kind of pain described above. Getting past this initial pain depends on getting to the point where there's an acceptance of the fact that this has happened. Of course, this doesn't mean thinking "it's OK"—because it's *not* OK. But when someone is stuck on focusing on "if only..." and "what if..." (rather than on how they're going to deal with this situation), the pain will still be in control.

The goal is to get to the point where you have control of your painful emotions rather than them having control of you. And while you can't "stop thinking" about the affair, you can have an impact on what happens whenever you do think about it. (There's an old saying that "what you feed is what grows.") So when these thoughts come, if you give in to them, go over and over them in your head, dwell and obsess about it for quite awhile—it only grows stronger (which sounds like what might be happening in this instance, since the pain is just getting worse)."

Instead, when the thoughts come, you can deliberately focus on shifting your thoughts away from the painful focus and toward whatever (anything) more positive about your current life or the prospects for the future. Of course, this is not magic and won't "work" the first time—but consistently shifting away instead of going deeper into the thoughts will gradually rob them of their power to create pain.

While it's a struggle to overcome the pain and get over all this, the slowness of the process can be more tolerable when there's an appreciation of the fact that the effort is not *just* to get over the past but to create a better future in the process. I know from my own experience that this can happen. While I would never have voluntarily chosen to go through this crisis in order to develop a better relationship, it helps if you can be aware that this result is possible. And in the meantime, the slowness of the process can be handled better by understanding and accepting that it will be slow, thus avoiding the frustration that is inevitable when there are unreasonable expectations about how long it will take.

So "believing it's possible" to recover is the first step. Then doing the work that is necessary (for as long as necessary) is the key to finally overcoming the pain. It's a gradual process, but the stronger your understanding and perspective about affairs, the weaker your pain will be—until

one day (as happened to me and many others), it just slips away when you don't even notice. In the meantime, you can't make the pain go away by wishing; only by working to make it happen.

How can I find hope for the future?

Question:

My sense of safety within my marriage was shattered by my spouse's affair, and my sense of safety within my country was shattered by the events of September 11. I feel helpless and depressed and can't find it within me to be hopeful that things will ever get better.

Peggy's Response:

Any life crisis (whether personal or in society as a whole) challenges our beliefs, our attitudes, and yes, our hope. However, the hope is to be found in the lessons we learn from the crises. While I don't personally subscribe to the idea that things "happen for a reason," I DO believe that we can "find meaning" through the way we respond to and learn from any experience.

The question above refers to a "sense of safety" being shattered both by the spouse's affair and by the 9-11 tragedy. What was shattered was actually the illusion of safety. We weren't safe to begin with; we simply didn't know it or didn't recognize it—so we inadvertently failed to take the steps necessary to try to prevent it. Whether affairs or terrorism, we tend to think that we are not personally vulnerable, but this false sense of being somehow immune makes us even more vulnerable because we fail to be aware and informed about factors that could make a difference.

There's clear evidence that people who had studied terrorism for the past few years were well aware that a major terrorist attack in the U.S. was likely. But in general, we preferred to ignore or deny the signs. With extramarital affairs, we have also preferred to ignore or deny the prevalence of affairs. We've tended to buy into what I've called the "monogamy myth," a set of beliefs that leads us to think we can just assume monogamy, that our marriage is somehow immune. In neither case (in dealing with the threat of terrorism or the threat of affairs) have we openly shared the kind of information and perspective that might have helped prevent them.

The hope we can find from these events is that now we are more aware/wiser when it comes to both terrorism and affairs. Therefore, we can better protect ourselves and others from being "victims" in the future. The national "wake-up call" that is so evident in the public's reaction to 9-11 stands as a great example of the kind of wake-up call that is also needed within marriages today.

For instance, the airline passengers who confronted terrorists on a plane in Pennsylvania after the World Trade Center was hit (as well as other passengers who confronted another would-be terrorist on a later flight) would not have reacted as they did without the knowledge gained from this new awareness of the risk of terrorism. Now that terrorism has reached our shores, we recognize the need to become more aware and involved in the protection of everyone.

Whether dealing with affairs or terrorism (as well as any significant problem we face), it's important to recognize that we shouldn't wait until it affects us personally before we try to address the issues. I learned that lesson the hard way many years ago when I was trying to deal with my husband's affairs—alone, without the kind of information and support from others that could have been so helpful. (I am now committed to "breaking the code of secrecy" about affairs in order to help others be more aware and informed.) I again learned the importance of talking about crises when I faced breast cancer about ten years ago. I was somewhat more informed about that, but again, had not talked about it and learned as much as would have been helpful.

Dealing with the 9-11 tragedy has raised our awareness of the importance of caring, service, and community—and has brought out not weakness, but strength and an indomitable spirit that will better prepare us for whatever might happen in the future. In a similar vein, dealing with an affair can raise our awareness of the importance of honesty, trust, and marriage in a way that may have

been either assumed or ignored for too long. If we learn from such a crisis (and share these learnings with others), we will all be better prepared to address any relationship problem in a more realistic, proactive, positive way.

So far from feeling helpless and hopeless when faced with life's challenges, we can use the experience to become stronger by being more open to learning—and sharing—our experiences with others. As for feeling "helpless" (as described in the above question), we are actually far more helpless when we are unaware and uninformed about dangers or risks. Once we know about certain risks, we're much better prepared to deal with them if/when they happen to us or to someone we love. The risks exist, whether or not we are aware of them, and knowledge can bring not helplessness, but power.

How do you heal in a marriage without communication?

Question:

You've often discussed the importance of communication between spouses in healing from an affair. Do you have any tips for healing when there is no communication, when the spouse who had the affair ends the marriage to be with the third party, and refuses to discuss what happened? The painful feelings of betrayal are just as deep, but the other party is not there to help with the healing.

Peggy's Response:

This question reflects one of the most common problems in "healing from an affair:" failing to understand that "personal healing" may or may not include "healing the marriage." As I've written in the past, some people who stay married do heal—and some don't. Likewise, some people who get a divorce do heal—and some don't.

The reference in the above question to the "importance of communication between spouses in healing from an affair" is not something I've often discussed. My focus on communication with your spouse has only been related to "rebuilding the marriage," not to whether or not you can "heal" from the experience. Healing depends far more on your own efforts to read/learn/understand the complex reasons for affairs (including the fact that they're not just personal failure) than to anything that does or doesn't happen with your spouse.

Here's a quick overview of the primary factors involved in the two different efforts:

"Healing" involves:

- Accepting the fact that it happened (no more "if only..." or "why me?")
- Understanding the complex reasons for affairs (not just "personal failure").
- Deliberately focusing on dealing with it and talking openly about what happened.
- Allowing time to heal.
- Believing it's possible to recover.

"Rebuilding the marriage" involves:

- being willing to answer your questions
- hanging in while you deal with the understandable emotions
- demonstrating a commitment to the relationship by severing contact with the other person

Note the difference in the two lists above:

- "Healing" is about what *you* need to do.
- "Rebuilding the marriage" is about what your *spouse* needs to do.

Especially note that the "talking openly about what happened" (included under "healing") does not refer to talking to the spouse; it means generally talking openly rather than hiding from others the fact that this has happened. Part of the first factor in healing ("accepting the fact that it happened") involves acknowledging it to others close to you.

The bottom line: while communication with the spouse is essential in rebuilding the marriage, it has very little correlation to whether or not someone "heals." It's common to make the (false) assumption that "healing" can only take place when the marriage survives—but, in fact, healing is possible with or without continuing the marriage (just as not healing is possible with or without continuing the marriage). This point is somewhat reflected in the last factor listed above under "healing:" believing it's possible to recover.

Do affairs leave a scar for a lifetime?

Question:

Do affairs leave a scar for a lifetime or can the spouse that has been hurt be healed completely without having a scar for a lifetime? Did the affairs your husband had leave you with long-lasting scars?

Peggy's Response:

I'll elaborate below—but basically the answers to the above questions are:

- Affairs sometimes leave a scar for a lifetime.
- The hurt spouse can heal without having a lifetime scar.
- Personally, I'm one of those who healed without a lifetime scar.

As with any life crisis, a spouse's affair is likely to leave you forever changed, but that's not the same as leaving a lifetime scar. Frankly, I think I'm a much stronger, wiser, independent-minded person due to the work I did to deal with this crisis in my life. For instance, I've written about the "preparation" it provided for dealing with a later life crisis, breast cancer. You can read this on my website (under the "Articles about Affairs") titled: Life Crises: Extramarital Affairs - and Cancer.

Whether or not any specific person has a lifetime scar depends far more on what happens after the affair is exposed than on what happened during the time of the affair. This does not mean that the healing depends on whether or not the marriage survives. As I've previously written, "personal recovery" (healing) is separate from "rebuilding the marriage." (Some people who stay married do recover and some don't. Some people who get a divorce do recover and some don't.)

If someone believes that it's impossible to recover, that can become a self-fulfilling prophecy that makes it very difficult to make much progress. Even believing it's possible (and working on all the other factors in healing listed above), this is still a long and difficult road. It takes a lot of time and effort for the scar to heal.

To provide a little more perspective, I'll share some of the results from the survey (of 1,083 people) that I reported on in my new eBook, *Help for Therapists (and their Clients)*.

Here are the responses to a question about whether they had healed:

Have you healed?

- 33% - No, I'm still in great pain
- 49% - I've healed somewhat but feel I will always carry a scar
- 18% - I've mostly healed and actually grown in many ways

It may seem discouraging that only 18% reported they had "mostly healed and actually grown." However, that's very misleading when you focus on the fact that 47% of those responding only found out about their spouse's affair "less than 1 year ago" (see responses below).

Here are the responses to a question about how long they had known about the affair:

How long ago did you find out?

- 47% - Less than 1 year ago
- 38% - One to 5 years ago
- 15% - More than 5 years ago

As I have repeatedly pointed out, I have never known anyone (including myself) who completely healed in less than two years. So since 47% found out less than 1 year ago, the responses about degree of healing are actually quite remarkable: 49% somewhat healed and 18% mostly healed.

Finally, here's another excerpt from the book reporting on my survey:

Much of the feeling of "always carrying a scar" may be based on the fact that there's now a totally new reality to their lives that doesn't fit with their previous sense of reality. It's much more than just dealing with the affair itself (as if that weren't enough). There's a sense that "my spouse is not who I thought they were, my marriage is not what I thought it was, my world is not what I thought it was."

At the same time, there's the potential for using the insights/learnings from any crisis as an opportunity for growth... While no one would deliberately choose to go through this experience as a way to achieve personal growth, it is nevertheless possible to find some gain in the midst of such loss. This is reflective of the well-known saying by Nietzsche: "That which doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

(end of excerpt from Help for Therapists (and their Clients))

What are some "safe" vs. "loaded" words?

Question:

You often recommend that people not use "loaded" words to talk about their spouses' affairs, for a variety of reasons. Can you provide all of us survivors with some "safe" words that we can use to talk about our spouse's infidelities?

Peggy's Response:

The above reference is to a section in "The Monogamy Myth" where I wrote about The Language of Affairs. Before addressing the question of "safe" words, let me clarify why it's important to avoid using "loaded" words.

One reason that dealing with an affair is such a devastating experience with such long-lasting effects is due to the way we think and talk about the experience. (The way we think affects the way we talk—and the way we talk affects the way we think.)

We've tended to think of affairs as due *only* to "personal failure"—failure of ourselves, failure of our spouse, failure of our marriage. The effect of believing that an affair is strictly due to the personal failure of the people involved leads to personal blame, personal shame, wounded pride, and almost universal feelings of devastation.

One reason we see affairs only in personal terms is because our entire vocabulary for discussing affairs reinforces this perspective. The standard words (like infidelity, adultery, cheating, etc.) tend to inflame the already raw emotions this issue stimulates. These "loaded" words just reinforce the sense of personal failure, making it more much difficult to recover a sense self-esteem or to rebuild the relationship.

A person can dramatically increase the chances for recovery by understanding the prevalence of affairs, the societal factors that contribute to them—and ultimately the fact that it's more than just personal failure. It's unreasonable for anyone to think they can prevent their partner from having an affair, or to think they're personally to blame if it happens. When I learned this lesson myself, it allowed me to go from feeling like a victim ("Why me?") to realizing that it wasn't just me; this could have happened to anyone.

In fact, thinking and talking like a victim inevitably reinforces the emotional impact and makes it more difficult to recover. It's natural and understandable to feel like a victim, but consistently using phrases like "he/she cheated on me" reinforces the victim feelings, making it more difficult to function in an effective way and ultimately to recover. A "safer" way of stating this (with a different emotional impact) is "he/she had an affair."

The first example focuses on what the spouse did *to* me. It's emotional/judgmental—and "loaded." The second example simply states what the spouse did. It's rational/descriptive—and more "safe." (Of course, nothing is completely "safe" when dealing with such a "loaded" situation; it's simply "safer.")

Another example of different uses of words and the responding impact: one of the most common tendencies is for women whose husband had an affair to refer to the other woman as "slut, whore, etc." These are, of course, extremely emotional/judgmental words (feeding the power of the emotions to be in control and reinforcing the feelings of being a victim). A "safer" (and more in-control) way of referring to the other woman is to simply identify her as the "other woman" or the "woman he had an affair with."

As for the request that I specifically provide some "safe" words to use instead of the "loaded" words, I can best inform by example. I've written literally thousands and thousands of words

about this issue and I always use "safer" words instead of the commonly-used "loaded" words. Throughout all of my writing, the only times infidelity, adultery, or cheating appear are when I'm "quoting" someone else. I never use those words to discuss this issue; I simply refer to it as an "extramarital affair."

The bottom line is that using "loaded" words allows your emotions to be in control—where you lose the ability to control your own thoughts and actions. On the other hand, using "safer" words can help you think more clearly and make more effective decisions, which is very important in being able to genuinely recover from this devastating experience.

How can I shake the feeling that I have no value?

Question:

I found out about 15 months ago that my husband has had as many as 10 affairs during our 21 years of marriage. I was self-confident and thought I had learned the value of developing as an individual who is not dependent on a reality connected with her husband. While I had instincts that something was wrong many times, I focused on not projecting trouble and seeming insecure. Now I can't seem to shake the reality that I have no value. I am almost at the two-year mark, and I am still crushed.

Peggy's Response:

The most significant part of the above question seems to be the problem with not being able "to shake the reality that I have no value." I wish I had a buzzer here—to beep a big **Wrong!** A person's value does *not* hinge on the actions of someone else, even a spouse.

It's understandable that we tend to think that our spouse's affair is a reflection on us personally. But, frankly (as strange as it seems), it has very little to do with us; it's about them. And WE are not the ones who weren't what we thought we were. In reality it's our spouse who isn't what we thought they were and our marriage that isn't what we thought it was—not us. I'll say it again... Our value is not determined by the actions of others.

(Actually the writer already recognizes that "an individual is not dependent on a reality connected with her husband." It's just that it's hard to hold onto that clear perspective when you discover that your husband has had 10 affairs.)

I can personally relate to this situation since my own husband had about 15 affairs during a 7-year period. Unfortunately, when I first began suspecting his affairs (from the very beginning of his having them), I was not self-confident; I really didn't see myself as having an identity outside my roles of wife and mother. So I know how difficult it can be to hold onto your sense of individual identity under these kinds of circumstances.

Actually, in my own case, I had deliberately worked to improve my self-confidence in order to be capable of eventually confronting the issue of whether or not he was having affairs. By the time we actually dealt with the affairs, I had gained enough of a sense of myself that I was better able to handle it. It's just a blow to your self-esteem, no matter what.

However, a spouse's affair is *not* about you. It's *not* your fault. The title of the very first chapter of *The Monogamy Myth* is "Beyond Personal Blame"—specifically because of the temptation to see our spouse's affair as a reflection on us. But we cannot accept responsibility for determining the behavior of another person. That's up to them. So it's unreasonable for anyone to think they can prevent their partner from having an affair, or to think they're personally to blame if it happens.

Here's an excerpt from *Beyond Affairs* that describes some of my experience.

I depended on James to meet all my needs for approval. My image of myself was totally tied into doing a good job as his wife. At the time I thought I was doing exactly the right thing. It's only from my present perspective that I can see how damaging that was to my confidence and self-esteem.

I think self-esteem (or a feeling of self-worth) is strongly related to the kind of attitudes you grow up with. Many women have been conditioned from the time they're little girls to stand on the sidelines and admire the achievements of boys. And boys learn very early to think of themselves as superior to girls. Fortunately, this is changing, but in the time and environment

in which I grew up, I had a clear image of the role I was to play in life—and it was a support role.

I had a growing feeling that I wanted more out of life, but I felt guilty if I did things for myself. I was becoming much more aware of the restrictions I had unnecessarily placed on myself, but I found it hard to break out of my habit of self-denial.

I was only one of many women who were learning that the fairy tale was over—that in fact it had never existed. It's important as women that we come to grips with the fact that ultimately each of us is responsible for ourselves. Our children grow up, our husbands die, or a divorce may leave us on our own. A look at statistics on divorce and on lifespans of men and women makes it clear most women will someday be alone. Our self-image and self-confidence will be all we have.

(end of excerpt from Beyond Affairs)

So the bottom line is that we can use this experience to reinforce our commitment to ourselves as individuals who just happen to also be someone's spouse. I try to keep myself reminded of this reality by a quote posted on my bulletin board right above my computer. It says, "A role is only a task. We've been using it as an identity."

What can be done about the anger?

(I'm printing two questions about anger—from both sides—before responding.)

Question #1

I'm more than willing to answer questions and discuss the affair, but I still struggle with the anger my husband has when we discuss it. It has been over a year and he is still very angry. Is this common? What can I do to stop his anger?

Question #2

It has been 5 months since I found out about my husband's affair. Our marriage has since greatly improved due to the amount of talking we have done about the issues surrounding the affair. I love my husband very much and I know he also loves me. Recently I have been feeling such anger towards him at times. Is this normal to have these feelings so long after the admission? The love is still there; it's just that there are days when the sight of him makes my skin crawl.

Peggy's Response:

As is clear from comparing the two letters above, dealing with ongoing anger is confusing and challenging for both the person who had an affair who is the target of the anger—as well as the hurt spouse who is experiencing the anger. Neither side can clearly understand why it continues for so long. That's because anger is not a decision; it's an impulsive reaction to understandable emotions (which are often caused by pain simply being expressed through anger).

Here are some excerpts from one of my books, *Dear Peggy*, with some of the information about anger that is included in the book.

Understanding anger:

Much of the anger comes from feeling, 'why did this have to happen to me?' It helps the healing process to actively seek information about affairs. Feelings of desperation can interfere with clear thinking and make it almost impossible to rationally evaluate the situation. It also makes it very difficult to work toward resolving whatever issues might make things better in the meantime. So it's helpful to try very hard to offset the emotions (fear, anger, etc.) with as much rational thinking as possible. Recovery comes from clear thinking—getting more information, understanding, and perspective about affairs in general. This will help you see your situation in a broader context, which in turn allows you to come to grips with your feelings.

One of the best books on anger is a classic titled 'The Dance of Anger' by Harriet Lerner, Ph.D. While it is clearly directed toward helping women understand and deal with their feelings of anger, it can be helpful in a general kind of way for anyone wanting to get a better understanding of this emotion and how to deal with it.

Dealing with the anger:

It doesn't work to bury your anger inside and hope it will magically disappear. You need to express your feelings—but that's not the same as 'acting them out.'

Here's a brief list of some of the keys to dealing with your anger in a productive way:

- Acknowledge your anger in clear terms to your partner. It will only complicate matters to attempt to maintain a brave front.*
- Be prepared for your feelings to change rather quickly, both in type and in strength.*

--Acknowledge the validity of all your feelings, whether they're turned inward (self-pity, depression) or turned outward (anger, resentment). All your feelings play a part in your efforts to come to grips with this experience.

--Whatever you feel is OK, but remember—you don't have to act on your feelings.

--Resist the urge to lash out and punish your partner. Any satisfaction you might gain will be short-lived.

--Express your feelings in ways that lighten the load of carrying them around—that help you feel better, not worse.

Unfortunately, our brain doesn't discriminate between actually experiencing an event and only thinking about it. So the best motivation for letting go of the emotional obsession is to recognize the damaging impact on your own body. It causes a repetition of all the pain that was felt originally—just as if it were happening all over again. And unresolved anger can just eat you up inside. So whenever the angry feelings involuntarily come to mind, it's possible to deliberately, voluntarily focus on some positives... It's a little like the old question of whether the glass is half empty or half full. Our feelings tend to follow our focus. So more of an effort to focus on the present and the future (instead of the past) can go a long way toward diminishing the strength of the negative feelings."

(end of excerpts from "Dear Peggy")

One of the problems with anger is that it is even stronger when the person who had an affair is viewed ONLY through the filter of this negative behavior, wiping out any appreciation of (or even awareness of) all the good things about that person. Most people have both some good and some bad qualities/behaviors—and it helps if both parties can recognize that an affair doesn't erase the fact that they also may have other wonderful qualities that have not suddenly disappeared.

One specific problem is the anger that often results from a failure to get answers to questions. If questions are never answered, they may continue to haunt someone for the rest of their life—and the anger is likely to continue. Any time this issue is set aside without thoroughly discussing it and getting as much understanding as possible, the emotions do not get thoroughly dealt with—and the anger can continue indefinitely.

But (as in one of the above letters) even when someone is "more than willing to answer questions and discuss the affair," the anger may continue. (The above letter indicates it has been "over a year.") Since full recovery from the emotional impact of this experience usually takes about two years (even with the best of efforts), there's still hope. Note that the other letter above indicates that it has only been 5 months—so continuing to try to overcome the anger is likely to pay off with more time and effort.

However, at some point, the question arises as to whether there is an unwillingness to let go of the anger as a means of some kind of punishment or revenge. In such an instance, there's little more that the person who had the affair can do to alleviate the anger. Anger is certainly a normal part of the process of dealing with this devastating experience, but it lessens as time and effort are devoted to coming to grips with the whole experience. So the challenge is for the hurt spouse to be willing to seek the kind of understanding of this process that can help them finally put the anger to rest.

A final thought about the effects of anger—not just on the one who had the affair, but also on the one experiencing the anger. There is a physical/emotional/mental toll for coping and dealing with the effects of what anger and bitterness can do to the person experiencing it. So even if there is a

reluctance to give up the anger for the sake of the relationship, it's a smart effort to make for the sanity and well-being of the one who is consumed with anger.

Why am I not over it after 2 years?

Question:

I am an avid reader of your material, Peggy. In some of your articles you state that 2 years is an average time for recovery. Well, I am coming up on 2 years and still harbor resentment, lack full trust, and still feel the need to check up on my husband. My husband who also reads your material keeps pointing out that I need to get over it since it has been two years and I have not left. What are we doing wrong?

Peggy's Response:

I can understand how difficult it is to be patient with the long process of recovery—and how sometimes there's a hope that if you just wait until the magic "two-year" point, that everything will be OK. However, the primary message I have often repeated is that I have never known anyone (including myself) who completely recovered from the emotional impact of this experience in less than 2 years. So two years is the minimum amount of time that it usually takes to completely recover from this experience.

There is no maximum time—because time is only ONE of the factors involved in recovery. So the two-year period of time is not "magic" in that recovery may never happen if effective steps are not taken. Recovery is only possible if both people are completely committed to the effort.

(Basically, the person who had an affair needs to do everything possible to help diminish the time and intensity of their spouse's painful feelings.)

Finally, regarding the final comment in the above question, that she "needs to get over it since it has been two years and she has not left"...

It is wise not to make such a significant decision as whether to leave or stay prior to the two-year point. It's critical to have sufficiently recovered from the emotional impact in order to make a clear, rational decision about the future. For more on this, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce."

How can I deal with the triggers?

(Here are a couple of questions about this very common problem.)

Question #1:

It's been about five months since the discovery of my husband's 6 month affair with someone that I thought was just a friend of his. We are in therapy and every time I think we are making progress, something triggers all the anguish and heartache all over again and I fall back into depression and panic attacks. Last night it was an episode of Sex and the City. I just don't know how much longer I can stay on this emotional roller coaster from hell.

Question #2:

How is it best to deal with triggers? I was recently looking at photographs taken during the time of the affair. When we took the pictures I was so happy. Now the sight of my spouse smiling in the photos really makes me worry. What can I do to get over it?

Peggy's Response:

This is a fairly pervasive problem—dealing with "triggers" that serve as ongoing reminders of the affair. The thoughts, memories, or flashbacks to a time when our spouse was intimate with someone else seems to be an inevitable part of the process. And when people are in pain over a partner's affair, it feels like it will never end.

While we can't prevent these thoughts from coming, we can make a difference both in their strength and their duration—if we refuse to feed the thoughts when they do come. There's an old saying that "what you feed is what grows." So when these thoughts come, if you give in to them, go over and over the incident in your head, dwell and obsess about it for quite awhile—it only grows stronger.

Instead, when the thoughts come, you can deliberately focus on shifting your thoughts away toward whatever (anything) more positive about your current life or the prospects for the future. Of course, this is not magic and won't "work" the first time—but consistently shifting away instead of going deeper into the thoughts will gradually rob them of their power to create pain.

Since it's unrealistic to think it's possible to just "not think about it," the goal is to get to the point where thinking of the affair doesn't trigger the same painful emotions. This process involves gaining as much information and perspective about affairs as possible in order to allow the rational understanding to become stronger than the emotional reactions to the thoughts about the affair.

Frankly, while the image of your spouse being intimate with someone else is a real nightmare for most people, especially in the beginning. Over the long haul, most people report that they recover from the fact that their spouse had sex with someone else before they recover from the fact that they were deceived. So while time alone won't make it get better, actively working toward that time can certainly help move the process along.

As for the issue described in Question #2 above, here's an excerpt from *Beyond Affairs* where I describe my own process of reviewing the past—and realizing how different things were from what I thought at the time.

It was a terrible feeling later on to go back and compare the situation as I saw it during this period with the actual events that were taking place in James' life.

--In April, when the kids and I met James at Hilton Head to look at our house—he had just been with Terry.

--When he was away for a week in May and I was concentrating on organizing our office for the move—he was with her again.

--And in June when we attended a going away party held for us on the night James got back from a trip—he had just been with her.

(end of excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*)

Of course, this was just one example of the many periods of my life that I revisited through different eyes after learning about his affairs. But, as I said, this effort to deal with a "revised reality" of your life is very typical.

For more about this issue, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Triggers - Images, Memories, Flashbacks."

How do I stop obsessing about the affair?

Question:

For my own sake, how do you stop obsessing about the affair, the third party and the situation. We are almost at the 1-year mark of the affair. We are working and seem to be doing well but reflecting on what went on a year ago leaves me lost and angry. Some days I can 'forgive' but some days I am devastated with memories. As the 'anniversary' of all this approaches all my good efforts seem to be for nothing. The shock, anger and pain are as strong as the day I found out.

Peggy's Response:

The process of personally recovering from this experience is a very slow, jerky one. I've repeated (ad nauseam) that it takes at least 2 years to fully recover from the emotional impact—even with the best effort by both parties. And during that time, there will be many ups and downs. On any given day, you may (as expressed above) feel "as strong as the day I found out" and feel it's hopeless that you'll ever recover. But there are no doubt other days when it's much better, and you feel very hopeful that you're "on your way" to recovery.

So one of the keys to not getting too discouraged is to recognize and acknowledge the jerky nature of this process. It's normal, expected (even inevitable) to have this roller-coaster, yo-yo, in emotions. But there should be a gradual diminishing of the number of times and the intensity of the feelings associated with each "down" time. So it's important to be patient with yourself as you go through this process.

However, it's not a case of simply sitting and waiting to feel better. The process of gradually lessening the down times is not completely out of your control. You need to constantly work to get more rational understanding (about affairs in general and your situation in particular) to help offset the power of the emotions. This involves reading everything you can find about the subject and talking about it (both with your spouse and with others who can be supportive).

Also, while you may not be able to avoid being struck by the feelings of "shock, anger and pain," you can have some influence over what happens once you get those feelings.

On the one hand, you can give yourself over to the feelings—and the "obsessing" that can accompany them—by reviewing every detail over and over in your mind, in essence reinforcing the feelings. (As for specifically obsessing about the third party, read the Article posted on my website titled: "The Other Woman or Other Man.")

OR you can deliberately move away from the feelings by distracting yourself with other thoughts or activities. This "distracting" needs to be planned in advance. Go ahead and determine what other things you can do or focus on the next time you're struck by these feelings—so you're prepared to go into action when the next attack strikes.

I'll close by sharing my own personal experience in overcoming these feelings and recovering. (I've shared this before but will do so again for those who have not seen it.)

Here's an excerpt from The Monogamy Myth:

BELIEVING IT'S POSSIBLE TO RECOVER

Those who succeed in recovering from affairs are those who recognize the need to redefine the way they see themselves and their place in the world. They accept that they are now different because of their experience, but recognize that they are OK. While none of us would choose this as a way of achieving personal growth, it is nevertheless possible for that to be the result.

For me this process felt a little like a see-saw, as I gradually shifted from being controlled by my emotions to being able to rationally understand what had happened. This process involved years of talking about my experience with a great many people and reading everything I could find about the subject of affairs. Gradually, its grip on me loosened and then slipped away one day when I didn't even notice. There was no great moment of truth when I knew I was over the hump. It was a very slow process of turning it inside out and upside down until I had control of it instead of it having control over me.

This is a common dilemma for many people—getting enough understanding to overpower their emotions. Often they are able to accept and understand what has happened intellectually long before they recover emotionally.

I can honestly say that I never get emotionally stirred up and upset anymore about my husband's affairs, and I don't think I could have reached this point without deliberately talking about and dealing with the issue. I don't think I'm unique. I'm no more forgiving or understanding or strong or unemotional than anyone else. But I licked these emotions, and I believe anyone can.

(end of excerpt from The Monogamy Myth)

What's the role of anger in recovery?

Question:

It has been 9 months of recovering together from my husband's affair. I went through the disorientation and deep pain you've talked about and now I feel angry about what happened almost all the time. I went from wanting to work things out to now wanting to walk away. Can you talk about the role of anger in recovery from a spouse's affairs.

Peggy's Response:

This whole issue of pain/anger can be confusing. Both are, of course, strong emotions, but some people feel more of one than the other—or (like above) feel one first and then the other. Such fluctuating feelings are often reflected in fluctuating attitudes about "wanting to work things out"—then "wanting to walk away."

So let's look more closely at the differences in the feelings and the related differences in what someone might feel they "want to do"...

Pain: The initial feelings are usually primarily painful feelings—closely related to the "shock" that comes with the initial discovery (even if you strongly suspected prior to finding out). There's a certain unreality about things that literally "turns your world upside down" and makes you feel totally out of control of your life. The pain of this initial shock often leads to feeling weak and perhaps incapable of taking strong action.

Anger: Then, as the pain diminishes somewhat (or at least you become accustomed to it), you may find that your thoughts go toward focusing on the unfairness of it all, which may lead to shifting the feelings of pain into feelings of anger. In fact, feelings of pain usually reflect an attitude of "How could you?" whereas feelings of anger are more a reflection of "How dare you?" It's really the same feeling with a different emphasis based on time and growing feelings of being capable of taking some kind of action rather than dissolving in a puddle of pain.

So regarding the above question as to "the role of anger in recovery from a spouse's affairs"...it may indicate that progress is being made in gaining strength to deal with it. If it can be used as a step toward being motivated to do what's needed to recover (rather than just remaining stuck in the initial pain), it can be used productively. But, of course, getting stuck in the anger (or acting it out) can be counterproductive.

Regarding the ambivalence about "working things out" vs. "walking away"...

That's a common dilemma—especially within the first 2-year time span I often refer to (being the time it usually takes to completely recover from the emotional impact of this experience—whether the emotions are primarily felt as pain or anger).

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* where I talk about this ambivalence.

When a person discovers their mate's affair, they're likely to go through a period of great ambivalence and uncertainty—when it's painful to look back and scary to look forward. While the question of whether to stay married or to get a divorce may dominate their thinking, they can't quite bring themselves to make a decision.

Since most people remain in a state of shock or emotional disorientation for some time after learning of a mate's affair, it's essential that they wait until their emotions are under better control before deciding the future of the relationship. The period immediately following their discovery is definitely not the time to make such a life-altering decision as to whether to stay married or get a divorce—most people are incapable of thinking clearly at this time.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

I personally know about this kind of ambivalence. Even though I wanted to stay married—and worked very hard (with James) toward making it work—I went through many "ups and downs" for 2 or 3 years after learning of his affairs. Even after over a year, I strongly considered "running away" and taking on a new identity because I couldn't see how I could ever deal with it - whether I stayed married or not.

So it's important not to let the feelings (whether pain or anger) dictate decisions. It's better to wait it out at least two years (while working to get as much understanding about affairs as possible) in order to make a clear decision that you can live with.

For more on dealing with strong emotions, see the Article on my website titled: "Getting Control of Anger and other Emotions."

How do I handle setbacks?

Question:

How do I handle setbacks that seem to bring me back to square one just when I feel I'm making progress?

Peggy's Response:

I completely understand (and relate to) this situation. In fact, most of us who have "been there" have had these times - when we feel we're making progress, then suddenly feel we're back to ground zero. (At the close of this response are a couple of quotes from my books, describing my own experience in dealing with setbacks.)

Unfortunately, the process of healing and growth is not the steady, smooth progression we would like it to be. It's more often a series of ups and downs, dramatic improvements and depressing backslides—a moving back and forth between periods of clear thinking and emotional confusion, with an occasional plateau thrown in.

The moral is, persistence will pay off. As time goes by, the periods of backsliding will be less frequent and less intense, until one day you finally really do get to a better place.

In the meantime, just realizing that this slow, jerky process is "normal" can help. When you think you should be doing better (not backsliding) than you are, it can be even more discouraging. But when you know that "this is just the way it is," you can be prepared for those down times (knowing that's just a normal part of the process) and not let them drag you down even further.

Still, you may sometimes wonder whether you're really making any progress. At times like that, it's important NOT to judge your progress based on a particularly good day or a particularly bad day, but on the overall. For instance, try to assess how you're currently doing overall compared to the beginning. Then later, compare how you are at that point compared to some previous point. As long as you can see overall progress, you're on the right track.

As I've said many times, there are no short-cuts, and this whole process takes much longer than anyone wants it to take or believes it should take. But it helps if you can acknowledge the fact that it takes a great deal of time to integrate this new reality of your life into your mind and heart. So it finally comes down to patience.

Of course, during this time, you're not just sitting, waiting for things to get better. You're continuing to actively work toward recovery, always reminding yourself that it *is* possible.

Here's the way I described my own experience in *Beyond Affairs*:

This yo-yo up and down in my ability to cope with his affairs continued to keep me off balance for two or three years. There were times when things would be great and I'd think I was over the hump and had adjusted. Then...Bam! I'd get knocked all the way back down.

(end of excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*)

And here's excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* with more about my personal experience. (I've shared this many times in the past—but will do so again for those who have not seen it.)

For me this process felt a little like a see-saw, as I gradually shifted from being controlled by my emotions to being able to rationally understand what had happened. This process involved years of talking about my experience with a great many people and reading everything I could find about the subject of affairs. Gradually, its grip on me loosened and then slipped away one day when I didn't even notice. There was no great moment of truth

when I knew I was over the hump. It was a very slow process of turning it inside out and upside down until I had control of it instead of it having control over me.

This is a common dilemma for many people—getting enough understanding to overpower their emotions. Often they are able to accept and understand what has happened intellectually long before they recover emotionally. But I licked these emotions, and I believe anyone can.

(end of excerpt)

Is it common to have setbacks?

Question:

I would like to see more discussion of setbacks and how to get through them. My husband has lied several times about things he didn't want to tell me about regarding women (current events, not the past). These were not affairs, just uncomfortable situations for me. But his dishonesty and lack of support have greatly delayed rebuilding trust between us. Is this common?

Peggy's Response:

I discussed this issue in an earlier Question: "How do I handle setbacks?" However, since dealing with setbacks is such a common problem, I will again make some comments that I hope will be helpful.

First of all, this question takes a slightly different slant in that it's dealing with current and ongoing lying about his relationships with other women—not just events from the past. So this makes it even more challenging.

In fact, under those circumstances, it's hard to see how there can be any real progress—thus making the idea of a "setback" a moot issue. (You need to be moving forward before you can get set back.) And there's little chance of forward movement as long as there is continuing contact with other women—and lying about it.)

So this particular question is better addressed by focusing on developing more "honesty" rather than focusing on dealing with setbacks. A good place to start is by reading the long Article I recently posted on the site titled simply "Honesty!"

As I've repeatedly pointed out, this whole process takes time. I have never known *anyone* who completely recovered in less than 2 years. Sometimes people think they've recovered sooner than that—but find a setback or a new issue to be dealt with. This is not to be discouraging; in fact, without this understanding, it can be far more discouraging and depressing in that you begin to feel hopeless that you will ever recover.

Of course, it requires more than just the passage of time to bring about full recovery; it takes both people actively working toward recovery. Even then, recovery is very slow, usually involving two steps forward and one step back. So it's important not to be impatient with this process, but to recognize that the key is simply to keep things moving in the right direction overall.

Is recovery affected by the length of the affair?

Question:

Does the length of time of the affair affect the chances of the marriage recovering, and if recovery takes place, the length of time for recovery?

Peggy's Response:

While most affairs last between 6 months and 2 years (when the initial chemical euphoria wears off)... sometimes they last much longer, especially if the opportunities to be together are limited due to distance or because the relationship simply becomes a "comfortable habit."

But the length of the affair does not appear to be a determining factor in whether recovery takes place—or in the length of time for recovery. Recovery is primarily determined by what happens *after* the affair is known, not before. Regardless of the length of the affair (or the number of affairs or any other specific situation), recovery does not seem to be correlated directly with any of those details. As I have often stated, what does make a difference in recovery (whether "personal recovery" or "recovering the marriage") is what happens after the affair is known.

In the abstract, we tend to think that some affairs are worse than others, thus some would be more difficult to recover from. We think affairs fall along some continuum—with an "emotional affair" or a one-night stand on one end of the continuum and a long-term affair or multiple affairs on the other end of the continuum. But when you are dealing with your spouse's affair, the only pain you know is the one associated with your own particular situation. And I have seen many people just as devastated by what might seem to be less difficult.

When it's YOU (and you only know your particular situation), you can't really compare it to other possible scenarios. It feels as awful as it can feel, no matter what. Part of that is because the bottom line is the same: you have been deceived by the person you should be able to trust the most.

So the most difficult part of the recovery is dealing with simple reality that you were deceived—regardless of the length of the affair. While recovering from your partner's sexual relationship with someone else may seem the biggest hurdle in the very beginning, it's the deception that takes longer to overcome.

Here are the results of one of my questions re: this aspect of recovery:

Question: If your partner has had an affair, what was the most difficult to overcome?

Women's responses:

That they had sex with someone else - 27%

That they deceived me - 72%

Men's responses:

That they had sex with someone else - 28%

That they deceived me - 67%

As you can see, the significance of the deception is far greater than the sex per se in recovering from a partner's affair—for both men and women. (As I've pointed out many times, the impact on both men and women is extremely similar when it comes to dealing with the emotional impact of their spouse's affair.)

To get back to the primary issue as to what affects recovery...

It's important to keep in mind that the factors that *do* determine recovery are different according to whether you're focusing specifically on "personally recovering" (regardless of whether the marriage survives)—or you're focusing on "recovering and rebuilding the marriage."

For more about what's involved in personal recovery and rebuilding the marriage... see the Articles on my website titled: "Keys to Personal Recovery" and "Rebuilding Trust after an Affair."

In both instances, you'll see that, in general, the specific nature of the affair (how long it lasted, etc.) is not directly related to recovery. The exception to that is when the nature of the affair has an ongoing impact on the period after the affair. Such cases include situations where the third party is a family member or a child results from the affair. (I have written about both these situations in the past, and it goes beyond the scope of this particular question this week.)

What progress should I expect after 5 months?

Question:

What sort of progress on the road to recovery after an affair would you expect or hope to see after 5 months?

Peggy's Response:

While there is no absolute timetable that fits for everyone...in general, it takes about 6 months to simply accommodate to the reality of the situation. During that time, the emotions are in control and the biggest challenge for most people is simply being able to eat, sleep and function.

Here are some excerpts from *The Monogamy Myth* about common experience during those early months:

In many instances, people feel so weak and depressed that they find it difficult to function. They sometimes isolate themselves from the rest of life, as if nothing else exists. They lose interest in their job, their family, and their outside activities. One woman described how she felt so shattered and disillusioned that she became a confused vegetable. And another saw herself as being insecure and vulnerable, like a baby learning to walk.

Here's the way others described it.

'The way things have been the past six weeks, if I can eat, it's a miracle-and if I can keep down what I've eaten, then it's the Second Coming.'

'Pain, oh my God yes, and hurt beyond belief. Sometimes I would get up from a chair and look behind me, astounded that it was not filled with blood, because I felt that I was bleeding, the pain was so great.'

'I have had nightmares, have become hysterical, and cried until I don't know where all the tears came from. I feel betrayed and like a part of me has been killed.'

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Once the full reality settles in and the body and mind are better able to work efficiently, you can begin the long, slow process of gradually getting more information and perspective about affairs in general and your situation in particular. Eventually, as your rational understanding grows stronger and your emotions become somewhat weaker, the recovery process can proceed. But even then, it's not a smooth path. And on "bad days," you sometimes feel like you aren't making any progress.

It's important not to judge your progress by a particular day, whether good or bad. Rather, you need to monitor you overall progress. For instance, are you doing better overall than you were at some earlier point. During this period (which generally takes about 2 years), there will be ups and downs, progress and setbacks, until eventually the good days are more frequent than the bad.

Here's an excerpt from our book, *Beyond Affairs*, where I describe this process as I experienced it.

This yo-yo up and down in my ability to cope with his affairs continued to keep me off balance for two or three years. There were times when things would be great and I'd think I was over the hump and had adjusted. Then...Bam! I'd get knocked all the way back down into a depression.

I frequently wished I could have amnesia. That seemed to be the only way I could forget the past. Also, I wished for time to pass. I'd always heard that time heals, but I never heard just how much time it takes. I didn't know whether I could last long enough.

"We spent many, many hours talking about our feelings and trying to get a handle on the whole experience. Little by little it got easier to handle the emotional aspects too...Finally, one day the pain just slipped away when I didn't even notice.

(end of excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*)

Moving beyond obsessively thinking of the affair?

Question:

It has been two years and five months since his affair. For the most part we have moved on, but why do I still visit this site first thing every Monday morning? Before the obsessive thoughts were an intrusion. I thought they had subsided but on further examination they still exist but I'm just more used to them, like they are a normal part of me. Does this eventually go away too? What a waste of my brain power!

Peggy's Response:

The above letter is representative of what happens to a LOT of people. They have reached a pretty good level of recovery—but long to find a way to finally shake the power of obsessive thoughts to disrupt their lives.

As I've often pointed out, short of a lobotomy, you will always have thoughts of the affair, but they need not dominate your thinking or interfere with enjoying your life in the future. While I've offered lots of insight and perspective that provide rational understanding of what has happened, there is always a gap between our rational understanding of something and our emotional acceptance of it. So it's good to continue to explore ways to move toward getting more and more control of the emotions as well.

I'm thankful for the many people who continuously let me know that they have been helped by the information and perspective I provide through my writing. And I'm also thankful for the additional perspective I gain from those who share (with me and with others) specific tools they have found helpful in their own journey.

So I'm going to do something I've only done a couple of times in all my years of responding to questions: I'm going to use (with permission) some writings by someone else. This sharing clearly articulates some of the key ingredients that were personally helpful to this woman and that may be helpful to others.

While this was not written in direct response to the above letter, I consider it an excellent overview of some of the most helpful steps to be taken to facilitate moving on.

I'm over three years post D-day and have been through all the stages. I hope, first of all, you know that what you are going through is very typical of what most people experience. In fact, it may be beneficial to review Peggy's Articles about Affairs. I know I read and reread them several times according to what I needed the most at the time.

I can't really speak to what may be beneficial to you in your situation, but I can tell you what most assisted me in recovery.

1. Stop personalizing the affair

If you work to discover the absolute mechanics of the hows, whys and whats (the science, so to speak) of affairs, the particulars of your own spouse's affair become much less personal. It's about why humans have affairs, not why your own spouse chose to. And really, regardless of what we all believe were "the reasons" our spouse chose to have an affair, most often there is a distinct pattern in why everyone is cheating.

2. Find joy in simple things

While you are in abject pain, it's difficult to refocus to things that may provide us with daily comfort: the songs of the morning birds, purchasing beautiful flowers for ourselves, finding beauty in nature, taking walks, going to an art museum, etc.

3. Make your life about more than "The Affair"

Every day becomes a burden when your time is consumed in thoughts about the great epic entitled "The Affair." I found that my thoughts and energy were just obliterated by constantly focusing on the affair; everything I read, everything I watched, every website I turned to all focused on infidelity. It can consume so much of our lives that we lose sight of other aspects of our lives.

4. Find time to spend time with yourself

Trying to maintain a broken relationship takes such effort that we tend to forget about ourselves. Find time to do the things you enjoy, without your spouse, so that all your time is again not consumed by the person who most caused you hurt. Develop (or re-develop) your independence.

5. Go back to beginning

Remember why you fell in love with your spouse in the very beginning. Talk about the silly things you did when your relationship began, remember the happy times, look at pictures where the two of you were happy, even put these pictures up in places you will see them daily. Make an effort to act as if you are dating again: hold hands, walk up behind them to give them a hug, buy a little present that you know they'll enjoy, create a CD of songs telling them how you feel, think of a way to show them your love, ACT AS IF you are deeply in love and love will follow.

These feelings will pass. And there is a reward to working through these issues, and that is the maintenance and strengthening of your marriage. Perhaps you will never love the way you used to, but you will be amazed as to how deeply you can once again love someone who hurt you so deeply.

Anyway, stop believing that there is a "right" way to love someone, an appropriate measure of how much we should love someone. Most people think of the Hollywood-style "love" that is the "way love should be"—it doesn't exist. We all define our relationships, and it's usually not like it is in the movies!

I hope this helps. These feelings will pass, do the good work and you will see improvements in yourself and your marriage.

(end of quote from someone else, sharing their personal experience and thoughts)

As the above clearly demonstrates, the ability of one individual to help another is a powerful thing. So I encourage everyone who reads this material to "pass it on" by helping others who are following in your footsteps.

Is that all there is?

Question:

After 5 years, the shadow of the affairs is still casting over me. Deep down in my heart, the affairs have changed my life forever.

Peggy's Response:

Obviously, this is not a "question," but a statement—and a powerful one at that, but it represents the way life feels for many people who deal with a spouse's affair.

For those who don't understand (because you haven't "been there") just why affairs are *so* devastating. It's because it's more than just the affairs (as if that weren't enough)... As I have pointed out in the past, it's that *"My spouse is not who I thought they were. My marriage is not what I thought it was. My world is not what I thought it was."* So, in essence, people are trying to accept a whole new reality, different from the one they thought represented their life.

The whole issue of affairs (and the effort to integrate this fact into your life story) can so dominate and overwhelm you that you cease to be able to focus on *anything* else—especially on anything pleasant or positive or peaceful. Sometimes it helps to "take a break" from the normal routine of life, to step back and see what *else* there may in life (beyond the dominant issue of affairs) that somehow enriches you as a person and/or enriches your marriage if you are still married.

While James and I passed through the crisis/integration stages of dealing with his affairs many years ago, we (like everyone) need to pause to focus on each other and on whatever gives meaning to us as individuals. And this process is greatly enhanced by "getting away"—which is what just happened this past week.

Those who visit the site regularly know that we celebrated our 50th Wedding Anniversary in May, 2005. At that time, the anniversary gift from our adult children was an all-expense paid trip to Hawaii—which we took in October of 2006. It was amazing to experience the sense of quiet and peacefulness that came from 5 days away from our normal lives and normal responsibilities. (This meant 5 days with No TV and No Computer—amazing!)

This time together ("away from our daily lives") made me aware (again) of what I know about most married couples: we're much better at taking care of our "responsibilities" (to friends/family/work/community/etc.) than in taking care of ourselves personally or our relationship with our spouse. Frankly, (both as individuals and a couple) we often come last—if there is any time or effort left over after dealing with our daily responsibilities.

When I talk about the importance of taking time to focus on your spouse, I want to be clear that I am *not* talking about "preventing affairs by meeting your partner's needs." Failing to "meet your partner's needs" is *not* why someone has an affair (even though it may be used as an excuse).

For more about this, see these Articles on my website:

"On meeting your partner's needs"

"Why do people have affairs"

Also, affairs are not caused by "problems in the marriage." Unfortunately, all too often people (including some counselors) will focus on the problems in the marriage as if they were the cause of the affair. And "after-the-fact" they may identify the particular problems in a given marriage and erroneously assign a cause-and-effect relationship. But *all* marriage have problems. So if those particular problems hadn't existed, they could have pointed to some other problems and said

they caused the affairs. The reality is, of course, that affairs only make whatever problems exist *worse*.

While unmet needs or problems in the marriage don't cause affairs, it is important for *any* couple (regardless of whether there has been an affair) to find a way of spending some "quality" time together - relating *as a couple* (not just in your "roles" as husband or wife). And even when involved in the hard work of dealing with an affair, it's good to try to *also* enjoy some time together. (Neither focus can wait until the other is fully addressed.)

Of course, it's also important for each of us to "take care of ourselves *personally*" by trying to spend some time/focus on what enriches our lives as a person—outside of our other roles in life.

"Life is difficult" was the opening line in M. Scott Peck's book "The Road Less Traveled." While this may be true, it's also true that life is short. In fact, the author died last month, a fate that (without getting morbid) is waiting for every human being. So it's good to do whatever things (little or big) than can bring some lightness to the inevitable heaviness that touches everyone at some point in their lives.

Since I wrote this shortly after returning from our time away in Hawaii, I was feeling quite "philosophical." There's something about spending so much time out with nature—which is what we did (hiking, swimming, and seeing some of the most beautiful natural beauty in the world) on the island of Kauai (the Garden Isle). Since we've lived much of our lives in beautiful locations, we have very rarely taken "vacations" so we're trying to take more "down-time" these days—as we recognize that our days on earth are getting shorter. (Of course, as mentioned above, *everyone's* days on earth are constantly getting shorter.)

So I hope this message stimulates some thought as to what is personally meaningful to each of you and that you seek to incorporate more of it into your lives—partly as a way of offsetting the "difficulties" that are so clearly present.

For some additional "inspirational" thoughts, see the list of Articles about Life-planning posted on my website.

Is recovery time affected by circumstances?

Question:

Does the recovery time have anything to do with measures such as how long the affair was, who the affair was with (husband's business partner), where the affair took place, how long a couple has been married? Is the impact of the affair more severe for the hurt spouse if the measures are more?

Peggy's Response:

While there are some variables that affect recovery time, it is *not* the ones mentioned in the above question. All the "measures" listed involve what happened before discovering the affair: how long, who with, etc. But the factors that make the impact of the affair more severe and take longer to recover are ones that are ongoing after the affair is discovered...like continuing contact with the third party, the third party being a relative, or a child resulting from the affair. These are not so much about the nature of the affair or the length of the affair, etc., but about the ongoing ramifications of the affair even after it has ended.

It's true that most people (while agreeing that all affairs are bad) also tend to see some affair situations as being worse than others. From the outside looking in, they see affairs on a kind of continuum—from an online affair or a one-night stand being on one end and a long-term affair or multiple affairs being on the other end.

However, when you're actually dealing with a partner's affair, you can be just as devastated (no matter what kind of affair, who it was with, how long it lasted or how many partners) as someone else who is dealing with a different situation. That's because when it's *you*, whatever you're dealing with feels as bad as it can feel; you have no basis for comparing it to how something else would feel.

Through the years I have seen people be just as devastated by an "emotional affair" that didn't involve sex as someone else was by a sexual affair. One reason for the universality of the devastation (regardless of the type, number, or duration of affairs) is that the devastation is primarily related to the fact that you have been *deceived*.

As for "recovery time," most people want it to be as quick as possible. Understandably neither partner wants to drag this out, but it just doesn't work that way. While time alone won't do it, it does require committing a lot of time to working through this experience and establishing a new relationship for the future. This can't be done in days, weeks, or months; it usually takes years. But when both parties are committed to putting in the time and effort required to deal with this experience in a constructive way, it is possible to finally overcome the pain. It doesn't happen by trying to "forget the past and go on with our lives." It depends on getting more understanding and perspective—both about your own situation and about affairs in general.

As I have repeatedly pointed out, I've never seen anyone completely recover from the emotional impact of a partner's affair in less than two years. Of course, the two-year period of time is not "magic" in that recovery may never happen if effective steps are not taken. Recovery is only possible if both people are completely committed to the effort.

What do I feel like something has died?

Question:

Why do I feel like someone or something has died??????

Peggy's Response:

In a very real sense, there has been a "death"—the death of the image that had been held of your spouse, of your marriage, even of yourself. Like a death, this is a life-altering experience. In essence, your world has been turned upside down and you must begin to make sense of this new world.

Most people go through the same stages that are part of dealing with any loss that is important to their sense of themselves and their place in the world. The classic stages of dealing with "death" are applicable in this situation as well:

First there's "shock"—the disruption of the world as you know it.

Then there's an effort to "hold on"—an attempt to maintain the old situation, the not letting go.

Next there's an "acknowledgment" of what is and a gradual acceptance of this new reality.

Finally, there's an "adaptation" to this significant change and a moving forward toward healing.

What are the guidelines to recovery?

Question:

In a recent Smart Marriages article you said, "It just means following the guidelines that are generally helpful in recovery." What are those guidelines and can you address recovery please.

Peggy's Response:

I suspect this question was submitted by someone who had not previously visited my site, but came after reading an article that was distributed through the newlist of the Smart Marriages organization, with which I am affiliated. (For more about this organization, see the additional information at the bottom of this posting.)

Now...to address the question above, for those who are new to my site, I'll quickly point you to the primary "guidelines for recovery." First, let me say there is no precise formula or prescription that works every time with every person. But there are some general keys that have been demonstrated to usually work (as opposed to those steps that usually don't).

Many people think "recovery" is tied to whether they stay married or get a divorce. However, there are two different kinds of recovery involved when your spouse has an affair:

- Personal Recovery relates to the issue of personally overcoming the emotional impact of this experience, regardless of whether the marriage survives.
- Marital Recovery relates to issues aimed at rebuilding the marriage.

For more on the differences between these two kinds of recovery, the Article posted on my website titled: "The long road to recovery."

For more about personal recovery, see the Articles titled: "Keys to Personal Recovery" and "Moving from Pain to Recovery." Also, it's important to get more understanding of affairs (both your own situation and affairs in general), and one of the best ways is recognizing that reading can help recovery.

For more about marital recovery, see the Article titled: "How Can You Ever Rebuild Trust after an Affair?" And for information about one of most critical aspects of marital recovery (getting answers to your questions), see: "The Need to Know" and "Talking about Affairs."

Re: the Smart Marriages organization referred to above...

This is a coalition of marriage educators, social workers, therapists, etc., working to support and enrich marriage through skill-based courses and programs designed to provide couples with the ability to deal more effectively with the various issues that may arise in their relationships. (They hold an annual conference, at which I spoke this year and will speak again next year.)

In fact, the proper name of the SmartMarriages organization is the Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education. For those who would like to learn more about the organization, I have a permanent page on my website that provides a quick overview. It's listed under the "Resources for Recovering from Affairs" section is titled: "Seminars and Courses on Marriage available through SmartMarriages."

Is the pain greater with a longer affair?

Question:

My husband's online affair included two encounters for sex and lasted four years. How do I deal with the pain of the affair lasting for so long? Is there significance to its length?

Peggy's Response:

The premise behind the above question is quite common—thinking that the pain and/or the recovery are determined by some specific aspect of the partner's affair (in this case, the fact that it lasted for 4 years). So I hope that the response to this particular question will also provide perspective for anyone wondering about the impact of their specific circumstances on their pain or recovery.

People generally assume that the pain of a partner's affair and the difficulty in recovering from it are directly related to:

- Whether it was a one-night stand or a long-term affair
- Whether it was "emotional-only" or also "sexual"
- Whether it was with a friend or family member as opposed to a stranger
- How many affairs there were
- How long the affair(s) lasted
- (any number of other scenarios)

This thinking is because most people see affairs as being on some kind of continuum—believing that the pain must be greater and the recovery more difficult on one end (where the affair lasted a long time or there were several affairs, etc.) and somewhat less difficult on the other end (where it was a one-night stand or "emotional affair," etc.) But, in fact, the specifics of a given situation generally do *not* determine the recovery time.

I can honestly say that I have known people who were just as devastated about their partner's one-night stand or online affair as someone else was about their partner's long-term affair or multiple affairs. That's because when it happens to *you*, you have no basis of comparison—so whatever your personal situation, it feels as awful to you as someone else's situation feels to them. In all circumstances, there has been deception—and this is what makes any kind of affair so difficult to deal with. (As I've written in the past, while the "sex" is a focus in the beginning, most people recover from the fact that their partner had sex with someone else long before they recover from the fact that they were deceived!)

So what *does* make a difference in the degree of pain and the time for recovery? Basically, it's *not* whatever happened before the discovery of the affair; it's what happens afterwards.

The length of time of the pain and the time needed for recovery are primarily determined by whether the person who had the affair:

- Severs *all* contact with the third party
- Answers all your questions
- Continues to answer questions and talk through the whole situation as long as you need
- Takes responsibility for their actions
- Is accountable regarding their whereabouts (to provide reassurance)
- Acknowledges your pain and shows genuine compassion
- Shows by actions (not just words) that they are committed to your recovery

Finally, I can speak personally to this issue.

My husband had over a dozen affairs over a 7-year period. They ranged from one-night stands to an affair extending over a 5-year period. On the surface, it would seem impossible to recover and rebuild the marriage after all that. But what made all the difference was what happened *after* he told me about the affairs. He fulfilled each of the above requirements toward easing my pain and supporting my recovery—and it made all the difference.

Note that even then, it still took 2 to 3 years to completely recover from the emotional impact. As I have often shared, I've never seen anyone completely recover in less than 2 years, so it's still a struggle for everyone. But the struggle can go on much longer, and perhaps never end, unless the above steps are taken to support recovery. And those steps have nothing to do with the nature or duration of the affairs.

How could he love me and "choose" to have an affair?

Question:

How could my husband possibly love me during his affair when the reality of it is that he came face to face at some point with the choice, (and I believe no one escapes that exact moment), and he chose hurting me. He didn't choose a "risk"... he chose "inevitable." How could he claim to love me, and "consciously" choose to betray me?

Peggy's Response:

This letter reflects precisely the kind of thinking that many people engaged in at one time or another. I remember when I also thought things were black and white—and felt very sure about some basic beliefs. Those of us who have been hurt by a partner's affair can't imagine that they would do this if they really loved us. We think: "If he loves me, he won't have an affair. If he has an affair, it must mean he doesn't love me."

If only life were as simple as we believe/hope it is. The strange truth is that while some people who have affairs no longer love their spouse—others do still love their spouse; they just want an affair in addition to their marriage.

I remember how incredulous I was when my own husband kept saying that his affairs "had nothing to do with me!" Here's the way I described my thinking in *Beyond Affairs*:

How can he say his affairs had nothing to do with our relationship? He says it wasn't personal—that it had nothing to do with me. Well, in my eyes it had everything to do with me. And how can he say it didn't mean he was dissatisfied with me or our marriage? He says nothing I could have done would have made any difference. Later, when James reflected on his reaction to my efforts during that time, he recalled thinking, "Wow, this is great; I've got this terrific wife who's doing all these wonderful things—and I've got my affairs too!" He felt like the luckiest man in the world. He had completely separated his affairs from his life with me.

(end of first excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*)

As hard as it is to believe, any thought that might be given to the possible pain is often dealt with by rationalization and denial. The thinking goes something like..."no one will find out, so no one will get hurt."

Here's a section of "Beyond Affairs" in which James later tries to describe some of the ways he rationalized his actions:

Anything this good for me that doesn't hurt Peggy or anyone else is bound to be OK. And as long as she doesn't know, how can she be hurt?" Later I would embellish this rationalization with the idea that my affairs were even benefiting Peggy by making me a better lover and generally giving me a positive outlook on life. I didn't see all this as rationalization then. I needed to feel OK about myself, so I believed it. Over the years I colluded with other men involved in affairs so we could all see ourselves as moral, trustworthy people. Now I see it was unstraight thinking, but you couldn't have made me see it then. My excitement was too high.

(end of second excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*)

One of the reasons it's so hard to comprehend this thinking is that (as James says above) it's "unstraight thinking." So even though the hurt spouse feels like they have made a "choice," it doesn't *feel* like a choice to the person involved in the affair—because for them it's not a rational

process; it's strictly emotional. This leaves us trying to make sense of something that simply doesn't make sense. (Some have even called it "temporary insanity.")

But whatever you call it, it's not based on any clear thinking and there is no "exact moment" when they *decided* to have an affair. Most people simply allow themselves to be carried along with the fantasy and excitement. Frankly, if I thought that James rationally considered having an affair, then consciously "decided" to do so with no concern for the pain it would cause me, it would be very difficult to recover (which sounds like the case with the writer of this week's question).

After 25 years of hearing from people on all sides of this issue (including those who have had affairs themselves), it's clear to me that nothing about affairs is as clear and clean-cut as we like to believe. But since most people avoid focusing on this issue unless or until it happens to them, they don't get good information about why affairs happen—so they tend to hold these kinds of beliefs. There is never one single reason for someone having an affair (like not loving their spouse); it's always a combination of factors. And the best way to recover from a partner's affair is to get a lot more information, understanding and perspective about the whole issue of affairs—especially about why affairs happen.

For more on this, see the Article on my website titled "Who has Affairs – and Why?"

How can I "forget" my partner's affair?

Question:

Four years ago when I found out about my husband's affair, I was devastated—but he refused to talk about it, and what he did say turned out to be mostly lies. Then one night a month ago, I finally got the truth out of him. I suffered so much emotional and physical pain during those years while struggling to deal with his affair. My husband feels that since it was over 4 years ago, that I should just forget it now. What are your feelings about "just forgetting it?"

Peggy's Response:

"Just forgetting it" is the most typical desire of the person who has had an affair. And not being able to "just forget it" is the inevitable plight of the spouse. Having heard from thousands of people in the past 25 years, it seems that "just forgetting it" isn't realistically possible (even if both people *want* to forget it). Any effort to bury it without thoroughly discussing it and dealing with it is simply burying it alive—and it just keeps coming back. It doesn't matter how much time passes, it doesn't just go away; it sits there between the two people and creates an emotional barrier that prevents them from being as close as they would like to be. In most cases, an unwillingness to deal with an affair (regardless of when it happens) may leave the marriage intact but it's likely to be a deadened, meaningless connection instead of what most people want out of marriage.

While it may be small comfort to know that this behavior is common, the pattern of telling some lies, some partial truths, some half-truths, etc. is almost universal. Finding out the truth is very much like peeling an onion, with one layer coming off at a time. Unfortunately, there's a failure to recognize that each new revelation leads to repeatedly triggering the raw emotions of pain and devastation. So the longer the process of telling the truth is drawn out (and the more layers are uncovered over time), the longer it takes to begin the healing process.

An affair doesn't necessarily "feel" like it's over until all the truth is out and dealt with. The best hope for recovery depends on both parties understanding that the standard attitude of "say as little as possible" about the affairs is exactly the opposite of what needs to happen. "Forgetting" is not the critical issue; the goal is to get to the point where remembering no longer triggers such painful emotions. That's what healing is all about—getting enough understanding and perspective so that you can have control of your emotions instead of your emotions having control of you.

How can I more quickly get over her affair?

Question:

It's now been 9 weeks since I learned of my wife's affair. I think we have made a lot of progress within our marriage as far as our commitment to each other. But things still bother me, and I don't want her to feel like I'm dragging my dealing with this out. I feel guilty at times because I keep bringing my issues up to her. She says she'll give me all the time I/we need but I don't want to see her hurt anymore as well. Any suggestions?

Peggy's Response:

My suggestions are patience, patience, patience. Naturally, both parties would like to shorten the time it takes to recover and rebuild after an affair. But it takes a long, long time. Of course, it takes more than just the passage of time; it takes talking and continuing to work together to deal with everything about the experience and to establish a new kind of trust based on responsible honesty.

To have made "a lot of progress" in just 9 weeks is a very good beginning. But 9 weeks is barely enough time to simply accommodate to the new reality of this experience. It's only now realistically possible to actually begin the recovery.

Even with the best effort in working together to recover, "Things will still bother" you and you will feel the need to "bring up issues" for a couple of years. This is normal, predictable, and inevitable; so there's no need to feel guilty about it. The challenge is to discuss it and deal with it in a way that is supportive of the benefit that is possible. For more on what is required of *both* partners, see the Article, "The Need to Know" that is posted on the Website.

The attitudes expressed in this letter are very encouraging: she says "she'll give me all the time I/we need" and he says "I don't want to see her hurt anymore." In a situation like this, everyone gets hurt; but the way to shorten the time of pain for both people is to responsibly deal with it—no matter how long it takes. As I said in the beginning, the best suggestion is patience.

How can I regain my self-esteem?

Question:

How can I recover my loss of self? Since learning of my husband's affairs, I no longer know who I am.

Peggy's Response:

While it's difficult for a person who discovers a spouse's affair to deal with the pain of this situation, it's often even more difficult to deal with the damage to their pride and self-esteem. Unfortunately, most of us have a difficult time maintaining our self-esteem even in *normal* times, so a partner's affair compounds our natural tendency to put ourselves down for anything we view as a shortcoming.

Any effort to address the issue of rebuilding self-esteem must begin with changing our way of interpreting affairs as a personal failure. The most destructive aspect of our belief in the "monogamy myth" is the damage to a person's self-esteem caused by seeing affairs *only* as an individual problem. We need to replace this purely personal view of affairs with an understanding of the societal context within which they take place. This new understanding is essential for a person to successfully deal with the pain of their partner's affair—and it's essential that they deal with this pain before trying to build a positive self-image. Some of the factors that can help in this process include:

- accepting the fact that the affair happened
- overcoming personal blame
- overcoming the secrecy that surrounds affairs

Of course, the sense of loss is more than just a loss of the dream they had for their marriage and for how their lives should work out. It's also, as this question implies, a real sense of "loss of self." While both men and women experience this as a problem for their self-esteem, men generally see it as a blow to their masculinity while women tend to *define* themselves primarily through their relationships, thereby feeling an overall sense of failure as a person.

As important as our primary relationship is, it does not define us. It is one of many roles we play throughout our lives. And when we appreciate the full range of roles we play in life and the many ways we can legitimately define ourselves, we can better recover any sense of loss of self that comes from learning of a partner's affair.

How do I stay and recover after being humiliated?

Question:

I just found out that my husband has had 11 affairs within the last nine years of our marriage. I was devastated because I did not have a clue. I thought we had a perfect marriage. I was happy and he had told me he was. Two of the women were supposedly friends of the family. He says he wants to change and none of the women meant anything to him. It was just sex. I am so torn. I want to stay, but I have been humiliated. I just want to recover and I do not know how. HELP!

Peggy's Response:

This question includes situations somewhat like the one I faced many years ago. At that time my husband told me he had had about 15 affairs during the previous seven years of our marriage. I *did* "have a clue;" in fact, for the entire seven years I had been highly suspicious (almost certain, but not really wanting to "know for sure"). My husband also said he was happy with me and with our marriage. (He had just wanted "both" the marriage/family and the outside sex.) I too "wanted to stay" and "wanted to recover"—and also didn't know how. (While I was "devastated;" I did not feel "humiliated," partly because he's the one who had affairs. I would have felt more humiliated if I had been the one who had all those affairs.)

Anyway, I learned "the hard way" that you *can* stay and you *can* recover—but it takes an enormous amount of time and commitment to talking through the whole situation and coming to grips with this new reality of the history of your life. Basically, your world has been turned upside down: your spouse isn't who you thought he was; your marriage isn't what you thought it was; your *world* isn't what you thought it was. So it's no wonder that it feels overwhelming to think of staying and recovering.

However, most of the material posted on the website is aimed at helping the process of recovering, regardless of whether the marriage survives. So it can be useful to read *everything*—and then to be patient with the very long time it takes for these understandings to alleviate the painful emotional impact of a spouse's affairs.

What about sharing my feelings on the "anniversary" of his affair?

Question:

It will be two years this month since I found out that my spouse had an affair. We have worked through the horrific pain, but I notice about this time of the year, those bad memories resurface. With counseling and a lot of talking we have worked through everything and now our marriage is better than it has ever been. I never bring up the affair anymore because things are so good, but I am wondering what your thoughts are about discussing with my spouse my feelings that happen on this "anniversary."

Peggy's Response:

When any significant event takes place, especially if it's quite distressful, you tend to remember the "anniversary" of that event. (Short of a lobotomy, there's no way to not remember it.) For instance, is any U.S. citizen likely to forget future "anniversaries" of the tragedy on September 11th?

On a personal basis, we're even more likely to remember the events that have a significant impact on our own lives. As anyone who has been through this experience recognizes, discovering a mate's affair is basically a life-altering experience. So naturally we are going to remember the date that "changes the world as we know it"—when we discover our spouse is not who we thought they were, our marriage is not what we thought it was, our world is not what we thought it was.

When we do "remember" the event, we also naturally "remember" the pain. However, with each passing year, the pain should diminish—especially when there has been the kind of effort described in the above letter. In the meantime, hiding the fact that the "anniversary" time is difficult is not likely to be an effective way of dealing with it. While discussing it may be uncomfortable, not discussing is also very uncomfortable—and isolating. Any significant feeling that we keep hidden (because it feels too "scary" or "uncomfortable" to discuss) only gives it more power to be disturbing. (This fits with the general guideline: "something that feels too awful to talk about often feels too awful to get over.")

Another factor in discussing these feelings is based on recognizing the importance of staying really "connected" to your mate—which can't happen if you're withholding significant pieces of yourself (what you're thinking/feeling doing). Since affairs themselves are built on deception and secrecy (withholding thoughts/feelings/actions), it's important to avoid any kind of deception involving "withholding relevant information" from your spouse.

One final comment regarding the statement above: "I never bring up the affair anymore because things are so good...—there's a natural inclination to think that recovery implies no longer talking about the affair. Frankly, when people tell me they've recovered and "don't talk about it anymore," I'm always concerned. Because the goal is not to get to the point where you don't (can't?) talk about it; it's getting to the point where you can talk about it—without triggering the painful emotions. As I said earlier, when doing the kind of effective work described above, the pain will gradually diminish through the years. And, in fact, the pain is likely to diminish more slowly if there's a feeling that something this significant can't be shared with your spouse.

Does it take everyone 2 years to get over this situation?

Question:

I have been married for 1 year and had a 6 months affair. My husband found out in October/2001. How long will it take for him to get over this crisis? How long will he continue to ask me the same questions? How long will he and I have restless nights? Does it take everyone 2 years to get over this situation or does it depend on how much it is to get over?

Peggy's Response:

Many of the questions contained in the above message are the same as those asked by most people in dealing with an affair. But there are also some specific aspects to this situation that make it quite different (and more difficult) than most. The additional difficulty relates to the fact that there is very little solid marital history to sustain them, which will almost certainly extend the time it takes to get over this experience.

If I understand the time-frame, her husband found out about her affair 5 months ago and the affair had lasted 6 months. So having been married for only 1 year means that the affair began *very* near the beginning of the marriage. So my comments relate to the specific questions asked above—keeping in mind the additional difficulty involved.

How long will it take for him to get over this crisis? Since it normally takes at least 2 years (in the best of circumstances with both people totally committed to talking through it and arriving at a different level of ongoing honest communication), a situation like this is likely to take much longer. It will require a really serious long-term commitment to dealing with it, in order to have any hope of rebuilding the trust that has been broken.

How long will he continue to ask me the same questions? He is likely to continue to ask the same questions until he feels confident that the answers are completely truthful and thorough in revealing everything. As important as it may feel for him to get answers, it's usually even more important that you be willing to keep answering for as long as he needs to ask. It's this "willingness" that demonstrates a degree of responsibility that is critical to being able to ever trust again.

How long will he and I have restless nights? There is no time-frame for how long the pain, stress, anxiety, uneasiness may continue. It all depends on the time and effort spent trying to deal with it together in an effective way. But it will *not* be quick; this process takes time.

Does it take everyone 2 years to get over this situation or does it depend on how much it is to get over? How long it takes to get over it has less to do with "how much there is to get over" (or with any of the specifics of what happened in the past) as it does with what happens *now*. In other words, the ongoing effort to deal with whatever happened is the key to how long it takes. For example, a one-night stand that is not fully disclosed, addressed, talked through, etc., can take as long (or longer) to get over than a long-term affair that is fully disclosed, fully answering all questions for as long as it takes, fully accepting responsibility for what happened, and fully committing to ongoing honest communication. So while it's not particularly helpful to focus on "2 years," there *is* still hope, even in situations like the one above, for eventually getting over it.

Do things get better as time goes by?

Question:

If it takes a spouse who has been devastated by an affair two years or longer to get over it, within this period of time, do things get better as time goes by when there is open and honest communication with the spouses involve?

Peggy's Response:

Getting over a spouse's affair is a very gradual process, and, yes, things DO get better as time goes by when there is open and honest communication as described above. (Without this effort, it's unlikely to get better just with time alone.) While there's no specific moment when things suddenly become better, the improvement can be recognized over time. The key is to avoid feeling that any *one* day (whether a good day or a bad day) is an indicator of how things are going. Progress is likely to feel more like "two steps forward and one step back," but as long as things are generally moving in the right direction, it's just a matter of time.

The situation described in the above question sounds like it is on the right track. Among those people (including myself) who have most thoroughly recovered from a spouse's affair, the key was talking through the whole situation for as long as necessary to reach a point of putting it in perspective and going on.

Here's the way I described my own experience in our book, *Beyond Affairs*:

The main reason for my hope that things would eventually get better was the consistent understanding and support James gave me during this struggle. He never said, "Shape up, it's been long enough now," or "How many times do we have to go through this?" or "I just can't keep talking about it; I've told you everything I can." He never said any of those things. If he had, I feel sure we wouldn't have made it. Instead, he kept loving me and talking to me and supporting me. He could see how hard I was trying—how well I had accepted everything intellectually, but how hard it was to deal with my emotions. We spent many, many hours talking about our feelings and trying to get a handle on the whole experience. Little by little it got easier to handle the emotional aspects too.

And here's more about my experience from my book, *The Monogamy Myth*:

As my understanding of affairs grew stronger, my self-esteem grew stronger as well. It felt a little like a see-saw, as I gradually shifted from being controlled by my emotions to being able to rationally understand what had happened.

This process involved years of talking about my experience with a great many people and reading everything I could find about the subject of affairs. Gradually, its grip on me loosened and then slipped away one day when I didn't even notice. There was no great moment of truth when I knew I was over the hump. It was a very slow process of turning it inside out and upside down until I had control of it instead of it having control over me.

This is a common dilemma for many people--getting enough understanding to overpower their emotions. Often they are able to accept and understand what has happened intellectually long before they recover emotionally. One person talked about sounding very reasonable and rational on the outside while dying inside from feelings of hurt and anger.

I can honestly say that I never get emotionally stirred up and upset anymore about my husband's affairs, and I don't think I could have reached this point without deliberately talking about and dealing with the issue. I don't think I'm unique. I'm no more forgiving or

understanding or strong or unemotional than anyone else. But I licked these emotions, and I believe anyone can."

Getting over it or getting out?

Question:

My situation mirrors yours Peggy: Mississippi, High School sweethearts, professionals, two children, 7 years of long-term affairs. I found out on my own after losing our 21-year-old son and other tragedies, but this shock tops them all. I was totally in denial. There is that spark, and he is completely back and so sorry/ashamed. I know it is best to stay, but I cannot get over the lies. Too much with too many for too long during times that I needed him. It's been 5 years. I need to get over it or get out. Help?

Peggy's Response:

This letter highlights many critical issues, so I'll try to address them in order.

Similarities of experiences with affairs:

Many of the specifics contained in the first sentence of this letter do reflect my own experience. However I've also seen through the years that whether or not the facts are similar, the feelings are often very similar for most people—including the shock, the denial, the need to get over it... In fact, when James and I first wrote our personal story in 1980 in *Beyond Affairs*, I received an outpouring of letters from people who identified with me. I got comments like, "You have told my story; it's as if I wrote it." or "How did you get my husband long enough to write a book with him." Naturally, our personal experience feels very unique, but often there are many common experiences, whether in facts or in feelings.

Simultaneously dealing with other stresses:

While the loss of a child of any age is one of the worst tragedies anyone can face, there is often some very stressful situation that is taking place simultaneously with the affairs. A pregnancy is one of the most common, but caring for a dying family member is also quite frequent—as are a wide range of stressful situations. It seems that the other stresses in our lives not only distract us from being as aware of the affair as might otherwise be the case, but they also make us much more vulnerable to feeling doubly hurt when learning of the affair. (As mentioned above, it's especially difficult to get over so much for so long when it happened during "times that I needed him" Ironically, the spouse will often cite feelings of being neglected as one of the factors that contributed toward their being vulnerable to an affair.)

Feelings of shock and denial:

It's completely understandable to feel shocked by learning of a partner's affair—especially if there was no suspicion prior to learning of it. However, whether or not someone suspects an affair before finding out about it, there's almost always a sense of shock at actually knowing for sure. It's at that point that there's a total disruption of the world as you know it and the oft-reported feeling of "devastation." As for denial, this too is extremely common. When something feels to awful to comprehend, we often deny it as a way of coping until we feel able to face the truth. (For instance, I went through a 7-year period of intense suspicion, but used all forms of denial to avoid facing the truth until I felt better prepared to deal with it.) So the denial mentioned in the above letter may have been an essential coping mechanism to avoid "finding out" about the affair in the midst of dealing with the tragedy of losing a son.

Still feeling "that spark"—and being "sorry:"

These are two factors that often do make a difference in determining whether or not someone can recover from this experience and rebuild the marriage. (The reference to "that spark" still being there is probably due to the fact that I've written in the past about how this can make a

difference.) And being "sorry" and "ashamed" are also positive indicators for the ability to rebuild the marriage. But, of course, as this letter shows, it's always much more complicated than considering only a few factors. There are many factors that play a role in deciding whether to stay married. For more on this, see: *Why does a person stay with a spouse who has had an affair.*

(Please note that this is not an "argument" for staying married. The final statement on this page is: I want to be very clear that I'm NOT saying anyone "should" stay. What I AM saying is that we should respect and support each person's individual choices about significant issues in their lives—even when we disagree or fail to understand.)

Dealing with the lies and the fact that there were so many affairs for so long:

Lying is inherent in having affairs. In fact, people involved in affairs often lie to themselves as well—rationalizing that "no one will find out; no one will get hurt," etc., and engaging in their own form of denial. In fact, I've often written about the mindset of those involved in affairs, which can be summed up as follows: "Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible." As for the number of affairs...once I recovered from the shock that my husband had had so many affairs (approximately 15 over a 7-year period), I actually found that the sheer number involved helped me see that it wasn't any other specific woman that he was seeking, but it was the "role" played by these women in a "fantasy" relationship that was, in fact, no real threat to the "reality" of ours. So regardless of how long or how many or any other specific factors, the primary indicators for the future of the marriage lie not with particular details of the behavior in the past—but with the possibilities for learning from this crisis and committing to ongoing honesty in the future.

"Getting over it or getting out:"

The difficulty of dealing with these issues is completely understandable, and I acknowledge that anyone who has been hurt by the lies and deception has a perfect right to feel this way. However, letting these actions in the past that have now ceased (and for which there is genuine remorse) determine the path of the future is not a "smart" thing to do. It sentences us to live forever as prisoners of the past rather than doing everything possible to learn from the past and build for the future. In fact, any decision about staying or leaving needs to be based not on the past, but on the prospects for the future.

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that address this issue:

Base the decision not just on the past, but on the future. No one has a crystal ball to see just what the future holds, but there are indications that can serve as a guide.

--Is there a willingness to talk about what happened and to try to learn from it?

--Is there a willingness to use the information in a constructive way instead of using it as a way to punish past behavior?

--Is there a willingness to acknowledge attractions as normal and likely in the future, and a plan for ongoing discussions of these temptations?

--Is there a commitment to honesty as the basis of the relationship (rather than just a promise of monogamy)?

--Is there evidence of a willingness to be honest by ongoing sharing of thoughts and feelings about subjects other than affairs? (If there is not honest communication about other issues, there's little likelihood there will be honesty in talking about affairs.)

--Even if there's no evidence of the things listed above at this time, does it seem reasonable to think of moving toward this way of relating?

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

The bottom line:

Finally, the primary issue in the above letter seems to be strongly related to the issue of personal recovery rather than to the state of the marriage. Since "personal recovery" is completely separate from (and not dependent upon) "whether or not the marriage survives," I would encourage more focus on the "keys to personal recovery"—particularly the very first one: Accepting the fact that it happened (no more "if only..." or "why me?") The process of recovery can only begin when this point has been reached—and no decision about the future of the marriage will solve this dilemma. As outlined in the "Keys to Personal Recovery" mentioned above, "getting out" doesn't in any way determine whether or not someone "gets over it."

How do I get my husband to see the pain?

Question:

My daughter is the other woman in an affair. She is married with 2 kids, and the other man is married with 2 kids. She has had a lot of problems with her husband in the past, but she should be taking care of the family problems without an outside influence. I just went through the same thing being the wife of the man that had an affair. I don't understand how she could do this after seeing what I went through. My husband does not think it's so wrong for our daughter to look to someone else, which seems as though he is blaming me for his affair. How do I let him know that there is going to be a lot of pain for 2 families down the road?

Peggy's Response:

This letter refers to several different issues. One set of issues relates to her daughter having an affair after seeing what she went through with the father's affair. The second set of issues relates to her husband's failure to condemn the daughter's affair.

While the specific question refers to the "pain for 2 families down the road" (appearing to refer to the daughter's family with 2 kids and the other man's family with 2 kids), the question is clearly about how to get the writer's husband to understand the pain of affairs in general and his own affair in particular.

When someone who has had an affair (like the husband) seems to validate that it's OK to for someone else (like the daughter) to have an affair under certain circumstances, it looks like a thinly-veiled effort to justify his own affair. And this is understandably frustrating and painful for the wife. And it can be especially frustrating when someone feels "outnumbered" in their own family by virtue of other family members sharing some particular position or belief system that is totally opposite from your own.

However, it's more effective to deal with each situation separately. And in a case like the above, it means dealing directly with the primary situation (which appears to be the husband's lack of remorse for his own affair) rather than trying to use some other situation (like the daughter's affair) to address the unresolved issues from the husband's affair. Any effective focus on the daughter's affair is unlikely unless and until there is more clarity and resolution of the husband's affair.

If (as it appears) the primary issue is whether the husband's attitude toward the daughter's affair means he's trying to "blame" his wife for his affair—then it would be far more productive to talk to him directly about whether he blames his wife than to try to decipher his feelings from his reaction to the daughter's affair. Direct communication is always preferable to trying to interpret someone's meaning—especially about something as important as this.

Wondering, guessing, interpreting, or assuming what someone else thinks often makes things worse instead of better. Each of us perceives the people and events in our world in whatever way best fits with our own "needs, wants, fears, expectations..." So I encourage everyone to work toward getting as much clarity as possible about others' perceptions—and to clearly articulate their own.

However, it's also important to realize that while someone who has an affair may "blame the spouse," that is just their perception—based on their "need" to somehow justify the affair and feel better about themselves. It is never the reality. No matter what problems may exist in a marriage (and all marriages do have problems), an affair is never a solution; it only adds more problems.

How do I get over this?

Question:

I have just caught my husband of 29 years having an affair with a girl at his work. She called me and told me. He said the affair is over, but I can't seem to get over the whole thing, considering that he works with her. I had my suspicions and we separated 3 times. How do I get over this? How do I trust him again? Having really bad emotional time with this. I dream it every night.

Peggy's Response:

This letter contains many of the typical issues faced by someone who discovers their spouse's affair. So even though many of these issues have been discussed in the past, I'll review some of the key points.

(The only somewhat unusual part of this situation is the fact that the third party called and told about the affair. And when that does happen, it's usually because the third party hopes this will cause the spouse to get a divorce—or it may be done for revenge if the spouse has ended the affair.)

Re: having an affair with a girl at his work...

This is STILL one of the most common types of affairs, illustrating the aspect of affairs that is affected by sheer "opportunity." Also, at work people present a side of themselves that is not representative of the whole person. They're usually committed to looking their best and being on their best behavior. And the work environment can have a sense of vitality and importance, making the workplace a very sexy place. Given this potent atmosphere, it's no wonder that the workplace has become one of the most popular sources of contact for extramarital affairs—as well as romances among the unmarried.

Re: he still works with her ...

The fact that he says "the affair is over" does NOT eliminate cause for concern about the continuing contact at work. Severing contact with the third party is a key factor in rebuilding trust. Until that connection is broken, it's unlikely that a couple can begin to heal the wounds of an affair. A reluctance to "let go" of the connection (whatever it's nature) may indicate some ambivalence about wholeheartedly committing to rebuilding the marriage—while totally severing ties with the third party usually indicates a clear commitment to the marriage. Frankly, actions speak louder than words.

Re: How do I get over this? How do I trust him again?...

This is related to the above point about "severing contact." There's no real hope for "getting over this" or "trusting him again" as long as there is still contact—of any kind. Trust is a by-product of trustworthy actions over time, not something you can just "decide" to do. Neither "getting past the affairs" nor "trusting again" can be done quickly.

Re: "just caught" and "having really bad emotional time with this..."

The letter indicates that she just found out about the affair. In fact, it normally takes the first six months after finding out to do anything more than get to the point where you can "eat, sleep, and function." Only when there's some regaining of equilibrium is it reasonably possible to begin to not be overwhelmed with the emotions. And, as I have repeatedly pointed out, I don't know anyone who has completely recovered from the emotional impact of a spouse's affair in less than two years.

How do I get over my husband having an affair with my best friend?

Question:

My husband had an affair with my best friend. How do I get over this? My husband decided to confess to me because of the guilt, and she did not admit to it at first. After asking her to please be honest with me, she admitted they did but it was because of alcohol. She and he said it only happened when they were drunk. I don't think this is a good excuse. What do you think? He confessed to me because of the guilt he was feeling (we too were high school sweethearts) married now 26 years.

Peggy's Response:

This question covers many different issues: affair with a friend, admitting or denying the affair and the role that alcohol may play. It certainly feels like a double-whammy when the affair partner is also a friend. Dealing with the deception by both your spouse and your friend can be especially disturbing.

When an affair is with a friend, it certainly compounds the pain—and the difficulty in dealing with the situation. For instance, when the third party is not an integral part of a person's life, it's always advisable to completely sever all contact. When the third party is a "friend," this is still a legitimate choice; but it's an individual situation based on the possibilities for the future. (I put "friend" in quotes because a true friend is unlikely to have an affair with your spouse in the first place.)

However, it's still possible to rebuild the relationship with the friend—if you want to rebuild it. But the degree to which this is a reasonable effort is determined not only by your feelings about it, but by your friend's actions. For instance, since the continuing presence of the third party in your life increases the difficulty in dealing with this whole situation, the third party needs to be especially thoughtful/responsible in order to overcome this drawback. So if a friend is genuinely sorry and takes responsibility for their actions, then the chances are much better for rebuilding. Frankly, the friend's continuing to deny it after the husband has confessed (and then trying to "excuse/defend" it as being because of alcohol) does not bode well for being able to rebuild trust with the friend.

As for "blaming" alcohol for the affair, this would be laughable and pathetic if it weren't so painful. While alcohol may contribute to such behavior, it certainly does not dictate it. But if alcohol played any part in contributing to the affair, then the only responsible action is to avoid alcohol in the future. For instance, even though my own husband did not "blame" alcohol for his affairs, he stopped drinking when he told me about his affairs—because he recognized that drinking helped create an environment of loosened inhibitions that he wanted to avoid.

Finally, perhaps the most positive (and significant) aspect of the information in this question is that "My husband decided to confess to me." This demonstrates a desire to change this behavior and to be more honest in the future. And since the overwhelming message I have received through the years is that the biggest long-term fall-out from an affair is the deception involved, voluntarily telling about the affair helps to break through this deception to begin the long process of recovery.

Note: the honesty does not bring immediate recovery (nothing can do that); but it does set the stage for working to create a more honest relationship in the future.

How can I get closure?

Question #1:

Even though the affair my husband had ended 10 years ago, and we went to counseling, I still sometimes have flashbacks of intense grief and anger. I feel that something is not settled, and that something is that I want something from his ex-lover. I want an apology and acknowledgement from her, as I've had from him, about how wrong she was and how she is sorry she hurt me and our children. I look up her name on the Internet and have almost emailed or called her. Should I? Would this help?

Question #2:

I had an affair after 9 years of marriage and 3 children... I was a stay-at-home mom at the time, ended the affair, went back to work, and for almost 2 years was emotionally abused because of the affair. I finally moved out with custody of the children and got a good job; however, there really was no closure. We are not divorced yet, and I find myself saddened and feeling very guilty... How do I deal with my feelings when all I can concentrate on is being a good mom, and trying to support them?

Peggy's Response:

It's a very normal human desire to want to bring some kind of closure to significant events in our lives. But, as is clear from the two letters above, it's often very difficult to achieve. Whether it's the spouse wanting closure with the third party or the person who had an affair wanting closure with the spouse, there's a strong wish to "tie up the loose ends," thinking this will bring closure to the experience.

Unfortunately, this is an unrealistic hope. Let me quickly add that I don't mean this to be a discouraging statement. In fact, it can relieve some of the pain of wishing for closure if you understand (and finally accept) the fact that it's highly unlikely that everything about the experience will ever be neatly "tied up" in a way that puts the whole experience to rest.

Part of the reason behind the wish to bring closure to this experience is based on a deep desire that it had never happened in the first place. But one of the critical keys to recovery is finally coming to accept the reality that it *has* happened, giving up the focus on "if only..." or "what if..." ("Accepting" that it happened doesn't mean "liking" it or implying that it's "OK." It simply means coming to grips with the fact that this is the reality of your life.)

Another way of thinking that contributes to the desire for closure is failing to understand another reality about affairs—that there are simply natural consequences to this experience that can't be avoided, no matter how much someone may wish to find a way to avoid them. Both of the above letters describe the kinds of consequences that often can't be avoided.

For instance, the first letter (about wanting closure with the third party) assumes that they can settle things with the third party by talking to them and getting them to admit certain things. This is not a good idea—for several reasons. First of all, the more time and energy spent focusing on the third party, the more power you are giving them. And the whole point is to diminish their power to affect your life in any way.

It's much better to reach a rational acceptance of the fact that the wished-for scenario is not realistic—and deliberately fight to reject the emotional impulse to interact with the third party. The truth is that people tend to believe what they want to believe, and there are many ways for the third party to deflect/deny the truth of any statement that might be made after the affair ended if it fails to jibe with their perception of the experience. So any actual effort to find closure with the

third party is useless at best and harmful at worst. In fact, reaching closure does not depend on anything being said between you. Meaningful closure is accomplished by having no contact with the third party.

In the second letter, the writer is struggling with her own lack of closure with her husband. In addition, she's continuing to be dragged down by her own sense of guilt and remorse. On a practical basis, while it's easy to understand the desire for closure with her husband, that's unlikely unless/until there is either a divorce or a reconciliation. This "limbo" period brings with it an automatic non-closure situation. But, as with the other letter, dwelling on what can not be controlled is not helpful. It's helpful only to do whatever you can do within the current situation.

The second letter specifically raises the question of "How do I deal with my feelings" of sadness and guilt. The writer goes right on to provide the only sensible answer to this question: by "concentrating on being a good mom and trying to support my children." While it's fine to recognize the wrongness of past actions, it's useless to wallow in the feelings of guilt—because the past can't be changed. The way to deal with the guilt feelings over the past is to continue to strengthen the positive feelings about yourself by virtue of the way you're conducting your life today.

In both situations described in these letters, real closure doesn't come from looking back and seeking something from others (whether the third party or the spouse). It comes from looking forward in seeking to use this painful experience to become stronger and more clearly in touch with what's important in your life as you move forward. That's because any crisis is not only painful, but is also a "wake-up call" that can be used to raise your awareness about what's really important in your life. The real closure comes from using this experience to become a stronger, more thoughtful, more realistic person. (And a possible bonus is that others will come to see you that way as well.)

DISCOVERING AFFAIR AFTER SPOUSE'S DEATH

How do I deal with discovering affair after his death?

Question:

I discovered my husband's affair after his death in June - a few letters in his desk drawer. We were married 31 years and I NEVER had a clue. We loved each other and were very happy. I felt totally cherished and totally safe with him. It is now - after his death - that I feel absolutely unsafe. How do I deal with this? He is not here to confront. I don't know what to do. The affair was twenty years ago according to the letters. It might as well have been yesterday as far as I am concerned.

Peggy's Response:

Note: This is a situation that I addressed in one of my books, *Dear Peggy*, so I'll share some of those thoughts here for the above letter-writer and any others who are dealing this particular difficult situation.

It's a very normal human desire to bring some kind of closure to significant events in our lives. And certainly, grieving the death of a spouse is compounded by the unfinished business expressed by the statement: "How do I deal with this? He is not here to confront. I don't know what to do." This desire to find out why an affair happened is almost universal, and unfortunately, many people never fully come to an understanding of "why"—even if their spouse is alive and willing to try to talk about it. (Often, however, there is not a willingness to try to explain why, so this feeling of being unfinished is not exclusive to the situation described above.)

One common problem is allowing a significant negative fact like this to wipe out all the good things about their spouse. Most people have both some good and some bad qualities/behaviors—and even having an affair doesn't erase the fact that they also may have had a good marriage. As for the confusion based on the feeling that "We loved each other and were very happy"...as strange as it may seem, an affair does not necessarily have anything to do with whether or not the marriage has any serious problems. Most of us have assumed that our husband wouldn't have an affair if we had a good marriage, but many men (like my own husband) simply valued both—the good marriage and having affairs.

So as difficult and devastating as it is to learn that your marriage was not the way you believed it to be, it's helpful to remind yourself (over and over) that the new bad information does not negate all the good that was also part of your life together. It's when we re-write the script of our lives in light of the new information, completely deleting all the good parts, that life becomes more difficult to bear. We can make it even worse—or we can save whatever parts may give us comfort. We can only hope that time and perspective will ease some of the pain for those who face such a difficult time.

(end of excerpt from *Dear Peggy*)

As for the fact that (even though the affair was 20 years ago), "It might as well have been yesterday as far as I am concerned"...that feeling is totally understandable. The long and difficult process of recovering from such information begins only when it is discovered, regardless of

when it happened. It's as if it just happened. So in addition to the specific issues discussed above that relate to discovering the affair after his death, the basic recovery process still applies.

Discovering affair after spouse's death?

Question:

How do I survive an affair that was discovered after the death of the cheating spouse?

Peggy's Response:

I periodically receive questions where there are "special circumstances" like the one described above. And while I have addressed this issue in the past, it's been a couple of years since I've written about this in a previous response, I'll add a few more comments about surviving this situation.

Even though it's not possible to resolve the questions that could only have been answered by the spouse, the long and difficult recovery process applies.

Here's a brief overview of the what's involved in "personal recovery"—which is needed by everyone, regardless of whether they have the option of dealing with the marriage:

- Accepting the fact that it happened (no more "if only..." or "why me?")
- Understanding the complex reasons for affairs (not just "personal failure").
- Deliberately focusing on dealing with it and talking openly about what happened.
- Allowing time to heal.
- Believing it's possible to recover.

For more information on "personally recovery," see the dozen or so articles under that particular category on the list of Articles about Affairs on my website.

And for more about various special circumstances (like "Emotional Affairs, Online Affairs, Office Affairs, Affairs in the Military," etc.), see the articles under the section titled "Special Circumstances" on my list of "Articles about Affairs."

How can I heal when learning of affair after his death?

Note: This situation provides important perspective even for those who have not faced this situation. It's especially relevant for anyone who has engaged in an affair, whose spouse does *not* know about it, and who thinks they will "carry this secret to their grave." That attitude does not take into account the fact that these things tend to have a way of eventually becoming known—even after death.

Perhaps a particularly cowardly person wouldn't care if it's discovered after their death, but most people genuinely want to "spare" their spouse from the pain of discovery. So it's important to recognize that for many people it's even more devastating to find out after death when there's no way to get any answers to help in dealing with it.

Question #1:

Six months ago my husband died. We had been married for 28 years. After his death I became aware that he was having an affair and died while returning home from his visit. I feel that I have so many unanswered questions regarding his need to be with someone else. Could you recommend web sites or reading material which would assist me on this subject for me to heal from the pain which I am experiencing?

Question #2:

My husband made a deathbed confession that he had two affairs, this was right as the hospice nurse was visiting, he had one dose of morphine and died soon after. He would not tell me any details. This was in February; I only told a bereavement counselor. Do I keep it a secret? It's a very heavy burden, we have 4 grown children.

Peggy's Response:

Apparently, this happens more often than we might expect because I have addressed this issue several times during the past 5 years, the most recent being just 9 months ago. Since I continue to receive questions about this issue (and since one of my criteria for determining which questions to address is based on how many questions are received about a given topic), I will turn to this again this week.

It's understandable to want to have some kind of closure about something like this. And certainly, grieving the death of a spouse is compounded by trying to deal with this kind of information at or after the spouse's death. And, as indicated by the end of the second question, there's the additional burden of wondering "Who can I tell?"

Following the death of a spouse who has had an affair, there is no absolute "right" answer as to who/whether to tell others. This must be an individual decision, partly dependent upon the kind of relationship both you and your deceased spouse had with those you might tell. Other considerations would be the strain of hiding this significant part of your life and not being "known" by those who love you. And, of course, it's particularly difficult to think of keeping this kind of information from grown children.

I must honestly say that my own personal tendencies are toward openness and honesty in all my close relationships, so that I would choose to tell my grown children. Of course, my own husband was still living, but I even chose to tell my 13 and 11-year old kids about his affair. So while this is my personal bias, I understand and respect those who might choose differently.

Regardless of who else knows this information, there's still the enormous difficulty of trying to "make sense" of the fact that things were not as you thought. (As I've often pointed out, the devastation of affairs goes far beyond the fact of the affair itself. It's that "your spouse is not who

you thought they were; your marriage is not what you thought it was; your world is not what you thought it was."

So the desire to find out why an affair happened is almost universal, and unfortunately, many people never fully come to an understanding of "why"—even if their spouse is alive and willing to try to talk about it. (Often, however, there is not a willingness to try to explain why, so this feeling of being unfinished is not exclusive to this particular situation.)

Here is some additional perspective that may be helpful in dealing with this:

You might try to avoid allowing this significant negative fact about your spouse to wipe out all the good things about them. Most people have both some good and some bad qualities/behaviors—and even having an affair doesn't erase the fact that they also may have had a good marriage. As strange as it may seem, an affair does not necessarily have anything to do with whether or not the marriage had any serious problems. Most of us have assumed that our husband wouldn't have an affair if we had a good marriage, but many men (like my own husband) simply valued both—the good marriage and having affairs.

So as difficult and devastating as it is to learn that your marriage was not the way you believed it to be, it's helpful to remind yourself (over and over) that the new bad information does not negate all the good that was also part of your life together. It's when we re-write the script of our lives in light of the new information, completely deleting all the good parts, that life becomes more difficult to bear. We can make it even worse—or we can save whatever parts may give us comfort.

How does one handle learning of an affair after his death?

Question:

I discovered 8 weeks after my husband died that he had had an affair. The other person was supposed to be one of my closest friends. How does one handle this? He isn't here to talk to.

Peggy's Response:

While this may seem to be an unusual circumstance, I have received this same kind of question several times during the past couple of years. In fact, one of the letters I received (along with my response) is included in my book, *Dear Peggy*. However, since it seems to be a much wider issue than previously recognized, I will add some comments about the issue of wanting to talk about it.

Of course, talking to the other woman is another possible action to take, especially if there will be future contact. If, on the other hand, there will not be contact with her in the future, that might make a difference. I've known many people who have talked to the third party; sometimes it works out well - while other times it makes things even worse. This is a decision each person must make for themselves, knowing that they cannot predict the outcome.

While I don't know whether or not it was based on a true story, there was a movie some years ago that described a situation almost precisely like the one above. It was "Just Between Friends" starring Mary Tyler Moore, Christine Lahti, and Ted Danson. It depicted a remarkable coming together of these two women following the death of the husband/lover. It was probably far too much of a Hollywood treatment to be realistic, but it might provide some different ways of thinking about this kind of situation.

RESOURCES: BOOKS AND SEMINARS

Which books should I read?

Question:

I found out about my husband's unfaithfulness 5 weeks ago. You have many books. Which one would be the best to start with?

Peggy's Response:

Many of the Questions submitted are specific questions about books or other resource material. So I'll take this opportunity to discuss books (both mine and books written by others) that can be helpful in recovering from affairs.

First of all, I strongly encourage everyone who is struggling with the emotional turmoil of a partner's affair to read—a lot. That's because the emotions are so strong that it's very difficult to think clearly or make rational decisions as to how to deal with the situation. And reading helps to get the brain functioning in a stronger way to offset/combat some of the control of the emotions.

When you're under the stress of the emotional impact of an affair, your thoughts seem to be out of your control and your mind jumps around or dwells on the same things over and over. Even talking about your feelings can lead to more (understandable) obsessing about them. But getting your mind in gear through reading the words of others can help move the process along rather than leaving you stuck inside your own head.

Obviously, I feel that my books are among the best available on the subject of affairs, but I also encourage the reading of many books by other authors. For instance, I have written Reviews of 8 Other Books on Affairs—as well as Reviews of 28 Books on other Subjects listed by Category. To find these, go to the home page of my website and click on the word “Review” on the blue bar. (Then when you click on the name of any particular book, you can read my review and then use the link I provide to the specific page on Amazon.com where you can get more information and purchase the book.)

As for my own books, I have a Bookstore here on the website where I sell all 8 of my books in PDF format—and I have a link from *The Monogamy Myth* to Amazon.com for purchasing that book in printed form. I also sell all my previous Questions (organized into "Collections" by topic) in PDF format.

As for recommending one particular book over another (whether among my own books or the books of others), book choices are a matter of individual needs/preferences. I have tried to provide enough information about all the books (mine and others) to enable each person to determine for themselves which ones would be the most helpful/relevant to them personally.

As mentioned earlier, I have personally written reviews of some of the best books by other people (including links to Amazon.com)—aimed at helping people choose the best ones for their particular needs. And for all my own books, I have posted descriptions and/or excerpts (often including the first chapter), and the Table of Contents. This should be able to serve as a good guide for choosing among my books.

Re: the question as to which of my books would be the best to “start with”...

The Monogamy Myth would probably be the best—because it's the most comprehensive resource I offer. (It emerged from the enormous amount of information and perspective I gained from many years of hearing from other people about the typical patterns and "what works" and "what doesn't.")

The *Recovering from Affairs* handbook is primarily focused on helping couples who are working to rebuild their marriages; in fact, it was an outgrowth of handouts we used in seminars we conducted for people who had already read *The Monogamy Myth*.

Dear Peggy is made up entirely of questions and my responses (not included in Questions previously posted on the website).

Beyond Affairs is our personal story, written more than 20 years ago.

(The other books are not specifically related to affairs, but are designed to provide tools for improving your life and your relationship.)

Where can I find information about seminars to help my marriage?

Question:

Where can I find more information in a particular city on where to go for a seminar or something like that for me and my wife? Is there a web site that you recommend?

Peggy's Response:

By far the best resource for information on seminars, courses and a wide variety of programs for improving marriage is the SmartMarriages website. This is the site of The Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education (CMFCE). See: www.smartmarriages.com

The site contains an extensive Directory of Programs, Classes and Resources. To see a list of *all* the courses around the country, you can Browse the entire Directory. Or to find listings by city, state or name, you can Search the Directory.

The Directory includes listings by the brightest names in the marriage education effort, as reflected by the name of the organization, "SmartMarriages." James and I are listed as well, although our listing is the only one specifically related to the issue of extramarital affairs. You can read our listing about "Beyond Affairs Network," our support group for those recovering from affairs, by Searching the Directory for the word Vaughan.

Since all of the organizations that are affiliated with SmartMarriages are excellent, I hesitate to single out any particular ones. However, one that has been recommended to me by people who have attended their sessions is Retrouvaille. While, like all the others listed, it does not specifically deal with extramarital affairs, it does aim at helping "troubled marriages"—which would certainly include those dealing with affairs. (Clicking on the buttons on the left side of the page will provide more information about this organization, including a list of "Weekends" of schedules of sessions in many states and some other countries.)

Since I find the SmartMarriages organization to be the best available today, it is the only one with which I am personally associated. In fact, James and I have presented seminars at quite a few of their annual conferences, including a Keynote Speech at the 1999 Conference.

Finally, to become better informed about the work of SmartMarriages (The Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education), they offer a Free Newsletter to which you can Subscribe.

DEFINITION AND OTHER FACTS ABOUT AFFAIRS

How do you "define" an affair?

(Here are some of the many questions I have received related to "defining" an affair:)

1. *What is an affair? Does it always have to involve sex?*
2. *Does sneaking behind your spouse's back to make contact with the third party constitute an affair?*
3. *Is pornography cheating?*
4. *Is it an affair if it's limited to "oral sex?"*
5. *How does one have an "affair" without having sex if the "affair" is not online?*
6. *Is there a difference between a "love relationship" that develops outside the marriage vs. affairs without "love?"*

Peggy's Response:

The classic definition of an affair is when a married person has sex (intercourse) with someone other than their spouse. However (as is clear from the above questions), that definition is far too narrow to cover the experience of today's couples.

Sexual intercourse is *not* a requirement for there to have been an affair. An affair has taken place whenever you are in a committed relationship (whether or not you're married) and your partner:

- secretly engages in a relationship with another person that involves any kind of sexual activity.
- secretly becomes involved in a sexually-charged relationship with another person, without sexual activity.
- secretly develops a deeply meaningful emotional connection, whether sexual or platonic.
- secretly engages in any variation or combination of the above.

As you can see, the primary factor is "secrecy." So the key to defining an affair is that secrecy and deception are involved. In fact, people often recover from the fact that their partner had sex with someone else before they recover from the fact that they have been deceived.

Under this broader definition, a person is likely to feel that an "extramarital affair" has taken place whenever there have been "secret" interactions with a third person—whether sexually-charged or emotionally close. Basically, if it "feels" like an affair to the spouse of the one involved in the behavior in question, then in "practical" terms it's an affair.

In the final analysis, it's up to each couple (and indeed, each person) to determine for themselves whether their particular situation fits the "definition." However, a focus on defining an affair often distracts from getting down to the issue of dealing with the situation—because in practical terms, it's an issue that needs to be addressed in a serious way, no matter how it is defined.

What constitutes an affair?

(I receive many messages that question just what is—or is not—an "affair." Here are 3 examples of those questions:)

- 1. What do you think is cheating? Is a kiss cheating, a platonic weekend with no sex cheating?*
- 2. My wife met this man. They got half naked. Is that cheating?*
- 3. Can you tell me "What constitutes an affair?" My wife says since there was no sex, she did not have an affair.*

Peggy's Response:

First of all, no one who is being hurt by a partner's questionable involvement with someone outside the marriage needs to be concerned with whether to "label" it as "an affair" or "not an affair"—because the label doesn't change the feelings about the behavior. This debate about the label is just a distraction and delay in dealing with what is obviously a disturbing situation that needs/deserves to be discussed, clarified, and dealt with.

There are a couple of reasons that I can imagine people might have for wanting this kind of definition. One is if they're trying to find a loophole in their own behavior—to prove to themselves that what they're doing "isn't really an affair." Another reason is that they're trying to find a way to prove to their partner that something the partner is doing "constitutes an affair." In either case, one person is trying to justify/defend/rationalize their behavior. So the debate is really just a waste of time.

It's much preferable to move from debating the definition of an affair to focusing on the *impact* of the behavior. I offer a lot of information on this site that can help in dealing with these kinds of issues, but making use of it depends on getting past this useless debate and on to the business of dealing with the consequences of the actions—regardless of how they might be defined.

Is "oral sex" an affair?

Question:

My wife recently admitted to engaging in oral sex with her boss, but insists that she is still faithful to me...in that they have not had intercourse. My question is, why would she make this distinction in her behavior?

Peggy's Response:

People do all kinds of mental gymnastics (rationalizations) in order to feel OK about themselves. Naturally, it makes no sense to draw this kind of distinction, but it's a very common kind of thinking used by people to somehow justify or explain away their behavior. Most of us have done this kind of "magical" thinking at one time or another when we're trying to kid ourselves about what we're really doing. For instance, I remember when I was a teenager having sex with my then-boyfriend (now husband of more than 40 years) that we did just about everything we could think of *besides* intercourse—so I could continue to think of myself as not doing anything "wrong" and still being a "virgin." This was back in the early 50s and was a common way of dealing with sex during that era, especially among "good" Southern girls.

In fact, this kind of splitting hairs to make our actions fit certain parameters is something we all do in various ways. While it may not be sexual, there's a tendency to rationalize whatever behaviors we want to somehow deny or "explain away." An effort to equate oral sex with still being "faithful" is a classic example of such rationalization. A person making such a statement may be doing it in an effort to convince *herself* that she's still faithful—not just to convince her husband. It's doubtful, however, that anyone could seriously see this as anything more than a desperate effort to avoid dealing with the reality of what has happened. Sometimes when people don't know how to deal with something, they try to simply deny it—even to themselves.

What's the difference in a one-night stand?

Question:

Are one-night stands different from other affairs that are ongoing?

Peggy's Response:

When someone on the "outside" tries to compare the impact of a one-night stand with that of an ongoing affair, they invariably think that a partner's one-night stand would be much easier to deal with. However, when it happens to *you*, you can't make that kind of "comparison." All you know is that what you're dealing with is incredibly painful.

Through the years I've heard from people who were just as devastated from a partner's one-night stand as someone else was from a partner's long-time affair. One reason for this is that the most lasting pain usually comes more from the fact that you were *deceived* than from the particular nature of the deception. And since deception is an integral component to *any* kind of affair, there's little difference in the impact on the person who has been deceived.

What about a one-night stand?

Question:

Is a one-night stand with a prostitute as bad as having an affair with someone you know?

Peggy's Response:

The bottom line is that in terms of degree of devastation, a one-night stand can be just as bad as any other kind of affair. However, since there are fewer facts and details involved than in a more involved affair, it might not take quite as long to go through the process of revealing, discussing, and dealing with all the facts and details.

It's not clear whether the above question was posed by someone who had a one-night stand or by the spouse. Either way, they're probably looking for a way to somewhat minimize the situation and feel better about it. But it's critical to keep in mind that any affair of any type will be devastating—and should not be minimized in any way.

If the question comes from someone who had a one-night stand, they may understandably want to believe that it's "not as bad" as an affair with someone you know. There's often an effort by someone having any type of affair to find some way to rationalize that it's "not so bad" (i.e. it was only a one-night stand, only sex, didn't mean anything, etc.) These efforts at rationalizing are partly due to the fact that most people desperately want to find a way to feel better about themselves in the face of seeing the harm their actions have brought to their spouse.

Actually, the general population (while agreeing that all affairs are bad) also tend to see some affair situations as being worse than others. From the outside looking in, they see affairs on a kind of continuum—from an online affair or a one-night stand being on one end and a long-term affair or multiple affairs being on the other end.

However, what I've consistently heard through the years is that *any* type affair feels as bad as it can feel. There have been instances where someone is just as devastated by their spouse's online affair as someone else is by their spouse's long-term affair. This is because when it's *you*, it simply feels devastating—and you can't compare how it might have felt if it had been some different type affair.

One reason for the universality of the devastation (regardless of the type, number, or duration of affairs) is that the devastation is primarily related to the fact that you have been *deceived*.

Here are the responses to a question from one of our online polls:

"If your partner has had an affair, what was the most difficult to overcome?"

Women's responses:

That they had sex with someone else - 28%

That they deceived me - 72%

Men's responses:

That they had sex with someone else - 30%

That they deceived me - 70%

Having established that the devastation is still great with a one-night stand (or some other situation on the "lower" end of a continuum), there IS one possibly "less bad" repercussion from a one-night stand. That is that the amount of time it takes to recover from it may be somewhat less. This is not because it's less painful, but because there are fewer facts/details to uncover and deal with. (Since most people want to know "everything" about the affair or affairs, it simply takes

longer to talk through all the facts and details involved in multiple affairs or long-term affairs than with a one-night stand.)

As I said, this does not make a one-night stand less "bad" (emotionally devastating), it simply limits in a practical sense the time it takes to reveal, discuss, and deal with all the facts and details.

Are some affairs worse than others?

Question:

Are some affairs worse than others?

Peggy's Response:

Since there's a general assumption that some kinds of affairs are worse than others, it's surprising that someone would even ask this question. But it's a very good question because, in fact, ALL affairs feel "worse" to the person who is dealing with it. It's only from the outside looking in that the devastation seems like it would be based on the nature of the particular affair(s).

For instance, most people assume that several affairs would be "worse" than only one—or that a long-term affair would be "worse" than a one-night stand—or that a spouse having sex with someone they know would be "worse" than having sex with a prostitute. But this hierarchy of what is worse only applies when it's not You! When it happens to you, you only know what you're dealing. You can't compare how it might feel with some different scenario. And it generally feels like nothing could be "worse"—no matter what the circumstances.

For instance, through the years I have seen people be just as devastated by an "emotional affair" that didn't involve sex as someone else was by a sexual affair. As I've pointed out many times, this reaction is primarily because of the one common denominator in all affairs—the Deception involved. It's this deception that is so devastating. And the deception exists regardless of what kind of affair—or how many affairs—or how long they lasted.

So it's important to respect the feelings/reactions of the devastated spouse—whether or not we deem their particular situation to be "worse" than some other alternative. When someone is trying to deal with a spouse's affair, nothing feels like it could be worse than what they're going through.

How long do affairs last?

Question:

I've had several affairs, but none of them seem to last very long. It makes me wonder—how long does the average extramarital affair last?

Peggy's Response:

Due to the secretive nature of affairs, it's very difficult to get precise numbers. But the best estimate of people who have studied this for years (and one which fits with my own experience in working with people through the years) is this:

When an affair is quickly "discovered" by a spouse, it may bring an abrupt halt. Or, of course, if the initial encounter produces some negative feelings or reactions, it may not proceed. But if it goes beyond the initial few encounters—and is not interrupted by outside forces—most affairs "run their course" in from 6 months to 2 years.

Naturally, as with anything, there are exceptions. There are documented cases of affairs that go on for many, many years. But the fact that we've heard of them is a reflection of the fact that they are the exception rather than the rule.

The 6 months to 2 years period is, of course, impacted by many factors: frequency of the meetings, intensity of the relationship, etc. But the overriding factor that almost always plays a major role is the inevitable time when the first flush of the euphoria involved with a new relationship begins to fade.

Whether a person is first dating the person they eventually marry or having an affair outside their marriage, there's a kind of "fantasy" period where two people are discovering each other and are blinded by the newness of the experience. The added "secrecy" of an affair may prolong that period beyond the time when it lasted while openly dating.

Unfortunately, people tend to attribute special qualities to a person with whom they're having an affair, when it's far more likely that the specialness has more to do with the "newness" of the relationship than with the particular person. This is why we see people go from one affair to another—or from one marriage to another—always trying to recapture that feeling that comes with starting a "new" relationship.

So focusing on this question of "how long an affair usually lasts" may help put this experience in perspective. Ironically, most people don't ask this question until after an affair is well underway—when they gradually come to grips with the fact that it won't last and begin to wonder when it will end. So while no one can predict in a given situation, it's true that most affairs do tend to follow this general pattern.

What is a "sexually-charged" relationship?

Question:

I suspect I already know the answer, but would you please define "a sexually-charged relationship with another person, without actual activity?"

Peggy's Response:

One example of the kind of behavior involved in "a sexually-charged relationship with another person, without actual activity," is in Online Affairs—but it is not restricted to that.

One of the significant reason for going beyond actual sexual activity (to include "sexually-charged relationships") when talking about affairs is because "sexually-charged relationships" present the high possibility of eventually involving sexual activity if they persist. This can happen regardless of whether either person *intends* it to happen.

However, even if it never involves actual sexual activity, a great deal of damage is done to the primary relationship. The deception of being involved in this kind of "sexually-charged relationship" is damaging in and of itself. As I've said many times, the spouse of someone who has an affair recovers from the sex per se before they recover from the fact they were deceived. So it's important to recognize the significance of "sexually-charged relationships" and deal with them instead of ignoring or denying their damage to the primary relationship.

Are affairs becoming more frequent?

Question:

Are extramarital relationships becoming more frequent?

Peggy's Response:

It's my opinion that affairs have been growing more frequent in recent years, primarily due to the increase in "opportunity" through contacts made on the Internet. Online Affairs are engaged in by people who had not had affairs before—and perhaps would not have had an affair without the seductive nature of online contacts.

However, it's also true that we are simply more aware of affairs—thus making it feel like there are more of them are happening. But there is still a great deal of secrecy when it comes to knowing about friends/family (instead of politicians and celebrities).

Unfortunately, many people who learn of a spouse's affair still try to hide it from others out of embarrassment, feeling it somehow reflects on them personally—as if they're to blame for their spouse's affair. And even more unfortunately, there is still a tendency for the general public to stigmatize the spouse as if it is their fault that this happened.

Ironically, there's a kind of Catch 22 in this situation—because the general public is unlikely to fully recognize the prevalence of affairs until more people openly acknowledge their personal experience in facing this issue. Until then, people will continue to believe that it only happens to a few people in "bad" marriages—which is *not* the case.

So even though we are beginning to recognize that affairs are more prevalent than previously believed, there is still a great reluctance to acknowledge just how pervasive they are in society as a whole (not just in the U.S. but also in many other societies in the world). In fact, my material is now being used on Websites in the United Kingdom, China, and Ghana—due to the fact that this is a worldwide problem, affecting millions of people.

For more about this, see the Article on the Website titled “The Monogamy Myth and the Prevalence of Affairs.”

I hope the awareness of the prevalence of affairs becomes more widespread, leading to more of a sense of appreciation of the fact that this issue is *Everybody's Business*. Here's an excerpt from the last section of the Introduction to The Monogamy Myth:

Traditionally our attitude has been that unless it touches us personally, we deal with it by ignoring it, denying it, or condemning it. Unfortunately, this does nothing either to help deter affairs or to deal with their consequences. If we're to be the kind of caring, compassionate society we aspire to be, we can't turn our backs on the countless people who are suffering alone.

I hope everyone will read the entire Introduction to *The Monogamy Myth*, (which is posted on the Website), especially the last section, “Why it's Everybody's Business.”

EMOTIONAL AFFAIRS

How do you define and deal with an "emotional affair?"

Question #1:

My husband had an emotional affair. I have all the feelings of someone discovering an affair but since he didn't cross that line it seems like not as big a deal. How do you deal with the issues of addressing an emotional affair?

Question #2:

I believe my husband is having an emotional affair, but he doesn't see anything wrong with it and does not hide it. Is it still an emotional affair?

Question #3:

Emotional affairs on the phone? How do you deal with that?

Question #4:

My husband has had three emotional affairs, by my definition. In his eyes he has never had an affair. How do I make him see that his behavior has damaged our marriage and if he doesn't accept responsibility it'll happen again?

Peggy's Response:

First of all, Yes, an "emotional affair" IS an affair. That's because the damage to the marriage is not based on just whether or not there was "sex" involved, but whether or not there was deception. In other words, the definition of an affair is any relationship with aspects of it that are kept *secret* from the spouse. "Secrecy" is the key to an affair—not just "Sex."

Now, as to what can be done about an emotional affair...

The first step is to be reassured that your concerns are valid and legitimate—because emotional affairs have a way of turning into sexual affairs unless they end. Even when the person has no intention of allowing the relationship to become sexual, unless the relationship ends, it's likely to escalate. That's just the nature of the progression of this kind of close emotional connection. But even if it doesn't become sexual, that emotional bond leads to a decrease in the marital bond and creates the kind of emotional distance that can cause the marriage to disintegrate.

While you can't force your spouse to end the other relationship, you can appeal to them about the damage of the secrecy—which may have the effect of the spouse at least being willing to discuss the other relationship. (Be aware that they may try to resist talking about it, even reacting in an angry or critical way, but that's just in hopes of "shutting you up" so they can more comfortably continue.) But the more it's discussed, the less the "fantasy" aspect of it is allowed to grow and the more the reality of the potential consequences may be considered.

Of course, this requires a lot of discipline on your part because YOU need to avoid any strong attacks on your spouse based on whatever information they may share—because that would simply send the message that they really can't talk about it, regardless of what you say about wanting them to discuss it.

It helps to remember that whatever your spouse is thinking or doing is going on anyway, whether or not you know about it. So it's in your own best interest to KNOW—thus decreasing the secrecy

that is the key to an emotional affair. This means trying to control your emotional reaction in order to keep the lines of communication open, despite the pain of discussing it.

"Emotional Attachments" Outside Marriage

Question:

What can you do when your spouse becomes "emotionally" attached to someone else? When it's physical, at least it's concrete and you can fight it. But what if they aren't having sex, but are so emotionally attached to someone of the opposite sex that they refuse to give them up—no matter what the cost to the relationship?

Peggy's Response:

Most people are afraid of their spouse becoming sexually involved with someone else, but a strong emotional bond can also pose a problem—especially if it's seen as a threat to your relationship. Of course, a combination of sexual and emotional involvement is the most difficult to address, but the emotional issue alone can be complicated in that we certainly don't want to rule out simple "friendships" with members of the opposite sex.

In trying to figure out what to do about an emotional attachment that goes beyond just friendship, it may help to understand what is involved in developing and sustaining this kind of attachment. The most important ingredient in an emotional attachment is the degree of honesty between two people. Sometimes a person feels "safer" to be totally honest with someone other than their spouse because the other person doesn't have the kind of personal investment in whatever feelings are shared that the spouse might have—and doesn't respond with the same kind of judgment based on those considerations. (A quick way to verify this for yourself is to think how often people will share information with a "stranger" that they would not share with friends or family—because the stranger doesn't know you, thus confiding in them won't have an impact on your life.)

If, however, there is ongoing interaction with someone with whom you have been very honest in sharing your deepest thoughts and feelings, this can generate a feeling of closeness that stimulates even more sharing—and more closeness, and on and on. Eventually, this relationship can become extremely close and an emotional attachment develops.

Naturally, it can feel threatening when a spouse develops this kind of relationship with someone else, especially someone of the opposite sex—and even moreso if there is not a lot of ongoing honest communication within the marriage. This is not to say that there should be any feelings of "blame" for any lack of honest communication within the marriage. Remember, it's much more difficult to be rock-bottom honest with someone when there's so much at stake. But it's worth actively making an effort to increase the degree of honesty within the marriage.

When making this effort toward more honesty, it's important that it be "responsible honesty," meaning that it is undertaken for the specific purpose of drawing you closer together. This usually means sharing honestly about "yourself" (your hopes, fears, dreams, frustrations, joys, sorrows, etc.) in hopes that your spouse will gradually reciprocate. People are drawn closer together when they feel they "really know each other." So, strange as it seems, married couples sometimes cease to really know each other after years of withholding their private thoughts from one another—but it's never too late to work on turning that around. While you may not be able to "directly" address the problem of a spouse's close emotional attachment with someone else, you can work at strengthening the emotional attachment within the marriage—which is sure to benefit the marital relationship and lead to diminishing the outside attachment.

Is it possible to just be friends?

Question:

After having an affair and then ending it-is it possible to just have a friendship. We're both married, and I know I still love my husband and couldn't leave him. But I don't want to lose this friendship we have developed, and I know he would be crushed if our friendship ended too. I just don't know whether we can be friends after having said we're in love. What can I do?

Peggy's Response:

It's always difficult to give up something that feels positive and satisfying. But, as with most things in life, there are trade-offs. So while it may feel crushing to give up the "friendship," this needs to be compared to the crushed feeling that would result in giving up the marriage. Whether it's possible "to be friends after having said we're in love" may be an irrelevant question. The issue is probably much bigger—in that anything that is hidden from a partner creates emotional distance that can create a vulnerability for all kinds of problems to develop.

Most marriages are in a constant state of change (either getting better or getting worse); they seldom remain the same. The condition of the marriage and the degree of commitment to the marriage are reflected more by actions than by words. So any decisions that are made about outside relationships have a direct impact on the improvement or detriment of the marriage. As with most things in life, "you can have most anything you want, but you can't have everything." It's wise to make a choice—and act on that choice—before it's too late.

What about "platonic" male/female friendships?

Question:

Is it possible for men and women to just be "friends" if one or both of them are married?

Peggy's Response:

This was the question behind the plot of the entertaining movie, "When Harry Met Sally," but it's also a question that perplexes couples in the "real" world. There's a fairly simple way of determining whether an opposite-sex friendship is a threat to a primary relationship. If your partner knows everything about your friendship, it's probably OK. If they don't, it's probably not. Even if there's nothing "inappropriate" going on, any conversations or activities with the opposite-sex "friend" that are kept hidden from the primary partner are likely to create a problem. So the issue boils down to being honest (meaning "not withholding information") from your primary partner about anything related to your relationship with the friend.

Many people think the same "rules" should apply to opposite-sex friends that exist for same-sex friends. But that's just rationalization and not very realistic—because the nature of the relationship with an opposite-sex friend involves a "sexual overtone" that doesn't exist with same-sex friends, except in relationships among gay and lesbian couples.

One of the places this question frequently arises today is with "online" friendships. When is an online opposite-sex friendship a threat to the primary relationship? The answer is the same as above: If it's really just a friendship, your partner should be able to see/know about all your interactions. If something needs to be kept secret, then it becomes a potential threat. So you can have your primary relationship and an opposite-sex friend without jeopardizing your relationship—*only* if you keep *no* secrets from your primary partner.

How can I deal with his "friendship?"

Question:

Two months ago my husband admitted he had feelings for another woman who I thought was just a colleague or friend. It was devastating, but he says that he loves me and wants our marriage to work. I am having a hard time dealing with the whole thing, especially since he lied to me over and over and hurt me a lot before he supposedly made his choice to stay with me and cut off the "friendship."

Peggy's Response:

Having a spouse admit he had "feelings" for someone of the opposite sex is in many ways a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, feeling attracted to other people is "normal"—but *acting* on those attractions is quite another matter. So honestly discussing the attractions with your partner is one of the best ways to decrease the likelihood of acting on them. Attractions become a much greater threat to the relationship whenever acknowledging them is taboo. If you can't talk about these feelings, they become your own private secret and are likely to grow in intensity and desire. But openly discussing your feelings brings a degree of reality to the issue that leads to a more sensible and responsible way of thinking, which in turn reduces the desire to act on the attractions. So it's important to talk honestly about your attractions and how to deal with them in order to reduce their power and effect.

On the other hand (as described above), acknowledgements of such feelings and the subsequent discussions can feel extremely threatening and disturbing. In order to deal with the situation in an effective way, there needs to be clarity around the true nature of the relationship. This means determining whether acknowledging the "feelings" is, in fact, happening *before* the "friendship" has crossed over the line into inappropriate behavior (thus serving as a *preventative* of acting on the feelings)—or whether acknowledging them is simply a way of minimizing a relationship that has already become more than a friendship (thus calling for dealing with the issues inherent in *that* kind of situation).

However, the more critical issue is one only alluded to in the above letter (in saying "he lied to me over and over"): that of establishing honest communication. Only with a genuine effort by both people to honestly deal with the real situation (whatever it happens to be) can a couple expect to really "make their marriage work."

What about an innocent deep emotional relationship?

Question:

My husband had an affair 3 years ago. We survived it, and came out (I think) stronger in the end. Now he has developed a deep emotional (his words) relationship with a colleague. He says it is totally innocent. I am scared out of my mind. How do I deal with this?

Peggy's Response:

Before responding to this particular letter, I want to address another question I received that is much more basic: What makes it an emotional affair?

It's an emotional affair if...

- I'm keeping the details of my relationship secret from my spouse
- I'm saying and doing things with the other person I wouldn't do with my spouse present
- I'm sharing things with the other person that I don't share with my spouse
- I'm making an effort to arrange to spend time with the other person

The woman who submitted this week's question is understandably afraid of her husband's "deep emotional relationship" with a colleague. If there is ongoing interaction with someone with whom you have been very honest in sharing your deepest thoughts and feelings, this can generate a feeling of closeness that stimulates even more sharing—and more closeness, and on and on. Eventually, this relationship can become extremely close and an emotional attachment develops.

Emotional affairs are growing, primarily due to:

- more workplace connections
- more online connections

Most people who get involved in an "emotional affair..."

- weren't looking for an affair
- didn't INTEND to have an affair
- didn't think they were vulnerable to an affair

The results of my survey of people who had online affairs indicated:

- 79% were NOT seeking an affair
- 49% eventually developed into a physical sexual relationship

If there is ongoing interaction with someone with whom you have been very honest in sharing your deepest thoughts and feelings, this can generate a feeling of closeness that stimulates even more sharing—and more closeness, and on and on. Eventually, this relationship is likely to seriously damage the connection in the primary relationship.

It really doesn't matter whether someone thinks an emotional relationship is "totally innocent." The fact is that emotional affairs are just affairs that have not *yet* become sexual. They either end or they escalate. So (as with any type affair), it's critical that all one-on-one contact with the third party be severed—before it escalates.

Therefore, any spouse finding themselves in a situation like the one described in this question needs to react to this situation just as seriously as if it were already a sexual affair and handle it in whatever way they would handle an affair that has already escalated. (The specific decisions as to how to react to a partner's affair are up to each individual; but the point is that there's no need to wait, because it won't just "go away"—and will almost certainly get worse.)

An 11-year emotional affair?

(Note: I received two questions (obviously from the same person) about the same situation. So I'm printing both versions of the question—since each one shares a little more detail.)

Original Question:

Can a marriage get through an 11-year emotional affair? Everything I've read talks about affairs that last about 2 years. We were together for 13 years when I found out about my husband's 11-year emotional affair. He cut ties immediately, but sometimes I wonder if he really could. Could anyone end it that abruptly? It's hard to rebuild trust after 11 years of lies. Please address this, no one else does.

Follow-up Question:

My husband had an 11-year emotional affair with his bowling partner. How do I get over that? Knowing how close they were and for how long. Wouldn't their emotional bond be even stronger because they didn't sleep together all that time? All that sexual tension. Can he truly get over the loss of his relationship with her? Help, no one addresses long-term emotional affairs???

Peggy's Response:

There are several issues to be addressed here: the fact that the emotional affair lasted 11 years (rather than the "average" 2 years); the fact that he immediately cut ties to the other woman (and the wondering if it's really possible to end it that abruptly after 11 years), and the issue of rebuilding trust. So I'll take them one at a time.

The 11-year time-frame for the affair...

While it's true that most affairs last between 6 months and 2 years, there are, of course, exceptions. In fact, one of the reasons affairs usually only last that period of time is because the "newness" wears off (along with the inevitable diminishing of the biological "chemical" connection that comes with the newness) after about 2 years. However, the sense of newness (and sexual tension) can continue much longer when the affair remains on an "emotional" level and doesn't move to include overtly sexual activity.

This lack of sexual involvement is only one of many ways an affair can continue longer. For instance, even sexual affairs (where the contact is limited—due to distance or other factors) can continue much longer. So it's not that all affairs last less than 2 years; it's just that most of them do—except when the contact is limited either by distance or lack of sexual activity.

Abruptly ending it once discovered...

It's entirely possible that the discovery of the affair came as somewhat of a "relief" in that it provided the impetus to end the affair. Sometimes these emotional connections can just become a "habit" that's hard to break without some intervening action. As long as everything is going along fairly smoothly, it's harder to decide whether/when to end it. But when it is exposed (and the bright glare of "reality" hits), it's much easier to end it.

So while everyone would wish there had never been a connection in the first place, a willingness to abruptly end the connection is not so much a reflection of the nature of the previous connection as it's a reflection on the nature of the future commitment to the marriage. For instance, a reluctance to "let go" of the connection (whatever it's nature) may indicate some ambivalence about wholeheartedly committing to rebuilding the marriage—while totally severing ties with the third party usually indicates a clear commitment to the marriage.

Frankly, the particular nature of the connection prior to discovery (whether sexual or emotional involvement) has very little impact on what will happen *after* discovery. In fact, it may not be until discovery that there's even an effort to make an assessment of the nature of the connection—in light of its impact on the marriage. And actions speak louder than words.

Rebuilding trust...

Much of the healing from this kind of experience simply requires time and effort from both people. Since trust is a by-product of trustworthy behavior over time, it's not something that can be "decided" or "bestowed." It naturally emerges as the marriage progresses with an end to the lies and a beginning of behavior that demonstrates honesty on an ongoing basis. (This rebuilding of trust is the same process for everyone—regardless of either the type or the duration of the affair.)

For more on trust, see the Article about Affairs posted on my website titled: How can you ever rebuild trust after an affair. And for those who are unclear about what's involved in an "emotional affair," see the article titled: Emotional Affairs.

How can I get past his emotional affair?

Question:

What do you think about long-term emotional affairs? My husband had an emotional affair with a bowling partner for 11 of the 13 years we were together. He ended it when I intercepted a phone call from her to him. How does the betrayed spouse get past the fact that he was so emotionally attached to another woman for so long? Should I believe they never had sex in all those years? How do you get over such a long betrayal? How do I learn to trust him again?

Peggy's Response:

The primary subject of this question (emotional affairs) is a very serious issue for a lot of people. Those who know they're dealing with a sexual affair tend to think that an "emotional affair" wouldn't be so difficult by comparison. However, as I've often pointed out, it's the deception that takes longer to recover from than the sex per se—and the deception is the same regardless of the nature of the affair. In fact, some people feel that a purely sexual affair (without any emotional bond) is LESS threatening than a full-fledged emotional affair that may not involve sexual activity.

For more on this, see the Article on the website titled: Emotional Affairs."

Actually, I can personally appreciate the feelings of the letter writer because many years ago (during the period when my husband was having affairs) he was ALSO regularly playing tennis with another woman—and I was highly suspicious that there was something going on. It turns out he was NOT having an affair with her, (he was having affairs with other women); but I was probably as distressed by his "known" closeness with this woman than by some of the other women with whom it turned out he was having sex.

Now, to address some of the specific questions raised above...

How does the betrayed spouse get past the fact that he was so emotionally attached to another woman for so long?

The biggest factor in "getting past" this is the degree to which contact has been severed with the other woman. As long as there is any contact, it becomes a constant reminder of "what was" as well as conjuring up legitimate concerns as to whether there is STILL some contact. Once there's confidence that contact HAS been severed, then recovery follows the typical path as described in the Article posted on the website titled: "Keys to Recovery."

Should I believe they never had sex in all those years?

Believing anything the spouse says depends on the degree to which the spouse displays a "willingness" to at least TRY to answer whatever questions/concerns are raised. However, it's certainly possible that sex was not involved, despite so many years. Generally, affairs last from about 6 months to 2 years, the period it takes for the initial euphoria of a "new" relationship to diminish. And even if there was sexual involvement in the beginning, it may or may not have lasted past the first few years. (Of course, none of this perspective helps - since it's the "knowing" or "NOT-knowing" that makes a difference in gaining some peace of mind.)

How do you get over such a long betrayal?

Strange as it may seem, the length of time of the deception may *seem* to present an unusual difficulty, but many people have just as hard a time getting over a brief period of deception. Again, this is due to the fact that it's the deception itself (regardless of how long) that makes all this so hard to overcome.

How do I learn to trust him again?

"Learning" to trust is a good way to put it—because it is a "process" that takes place over time. Simply deciding to trust doesn't really work. As I have often explained, trust is not something you can "bestow;" it is something that is earned. So it develops as a byproduct of trustworthy behavior over time. For more on this, see the Article posted on the website titled: "How can you ever rebuild trust after an affair?"

Are emotional affairs possible?

Question:

Is it possible for people to have emotional affairs? My ex spent time and money without telling me on his female friend who was suffering from cervical cancer. He claims there was no affair. But I felt cheated and that he did things behind my back.

Peggy's Response:

It's possible that a person may convince themselves that "there was no affair" (despite evidence to the contrary). Ironically, people can look at the same events and circumstances—and have totally different interpretations of them. To understand more about this idea, see an Article posted on the website titled: "The Power of Perception."

However, the key to determining whether it really is an "emotional affair" is in the fact that "he did things behind my back." Normally, "doing things behind a spouse's back" indicates an awareness on some level that it's wrong. If someone REALLY thinks something is OK, they're more likely to feel free to mention it. So the secrecy itself is what determines that it's an emotional affair.

The brief way to know when it's an emotional affair is if someone is doing any of these things:

- Keeping the details of the relationship secret from their spouse.

- Saying and doing things with the other person that they wouldn't do with their spouse present.

- Sharing things with the other person that they don't share with their spouse.

- Making an effort to arrange to spend time with the other person.

Regardless of whether the initial intention was "innocent" (just wanting to be helpful to the other person)... if there's ongoing interaction with someone with whom you share deep, significant issues, this can generate a feeling of closeness that stimulates even more sharing and more closeness, and on and on. And eventually, this relationship takes on even greater importance and is likely to seriously damage the marriage.

Footnote: The fact that the writer of this question refers to her spouse as her "ex" illustrates the likely significance of the outside relationship—which clearly *was* an affair.

Please read (or re-read) my Article about this issue that is permanently posted on the website, titled: "Emotional Affairs."

Rationalizing an emotional affair as just "talking to a friend?"

Question:

My wife has been going through a hard time lately and instead of seeking comfort in our marriage she has confided in another man. They talk on the phone continuously and flirt and she has completely disengaged from me. They also flirt and have sexual banter. How do I tell her she is having an emotional affair when she thinks she is just talking to a friend to help her through this hard time in her life and doing nothing wrong?

Peggy's Response:

Unfortunately, "emotional affairs" are a growing phenomenon, primarily due to two factors: more women in the workplace and more opportunities for online affairs. But many people who are involved in an emotional affair deny that it's an affair. They tend to define an affair as requiring that it involve actual "sexual" contact.

However, an "emotional affair" *is* an affair—because an affair is not determined by whether or not there was "sex" involved, but whether or not there was deception. In other words, the definition of an affair is any relationship with aspects of it that are kept secret from the spouse.

For instance, an affair has taken place when someone does any of the following:

1. secretly engages in a relationship with another person that involves any kind of sexual activity.
2. secretly becomes involved in a sexually-charged relationship with another person, without actual sexual activity.
3. secretly develops a deeply meaningful emotional connection that is "platonic."
4. secretly engages in any variation or combination of the above.

So secrecy and deception are the keys to an affair—not "sex." The deception is also the most difficult to overcome. The results of an online poll we took on the site a couple of years ago showed that most people (both men and women) recover from the fact that their partner had sex with someone else before they recover from the fact that they were deceived. So in the final analysis, an affair is more about "breaking trust" than about "having sex."

For the responses to the question: "If your partner has had an affair, what was the most difficult to overcome?" (and other information about this issue), see the article posted on the website titled: Emotional Affairs.

During the past few years, I have contributed to many magazine and newspaper articles dealing specifically with the issue of emotional affairs. You can read some of these articles on the website under the "Media Articles" section of the White Tab for "Articles." Included in the Media Articles are ones from: Psychology Today, Marie Claire Magazine, Ladies Home Journal Online, and USA Today.

Finally, I want to recommend an excellent book that deals with this issue (among other issues): *NOT "Just Friends"* by Shirley Glass. (Most people who engage in an "emotional affair" begin by saying, and perhaps even thinking, that's it's "just a friend.") You can read my Review of this book by clicking on the Blue Tab marked "Reviews," then clicking on "Affairs."

Here's an excerpt from her book:

Eighty-two percent of the unfaithful partners I've treated have had an affair with someone who was, at first, 'just a friend.' ... Secret emotional intimacy is the first warning sign of impending betrayal.

The bottom line is that it is important to take this whole issue of emotional affairs very seriously—and to recognize both its prevalence and its power. As I've said many times, people are even more vulnerable when they think they're immune just because they don't intend to have an affair. The fact is that anyone is vulnerable, so you need to avoid kidding yourself that it's "just a friend."

What about severing contact when it's only an "emotional affair?"

Question:

My husband had an emotional affair with a co-worker. One of your previous Questions was about the importance of severing contact with the third party, even if it means changing jobs. He read it but said since his was only an emotional affair he didn't need to leave work? His counselor supports this view. What do you think?

Peggy's Response:

The above is only one of many questions I receive about "emotional affairs." In the above letter, the use of the words "only an emotional affair" is an obvious attempt to minimize the significance of a "non-sexual affair." However, in many ways, this situation is even more volatile than an affair that is already sexual—because it's almost certainly just a matter of time. The intensity and sexually-charged nature of this kind of emotional affair means that it will almost inevitably turn sexual at some point.

However, even if it never becomes overtly sexual, it's still as dangerous and threatening (and painful) as a sexual affair. While it may seem that one type of affair (sexual) would be worse than a different type (emotional), this is NOT the case. After many years of hearing from thousands of people dealing with affairs, I've found that while a sexual affair focuses on the sexual aspect in the beginning, people recover from the fact that their partner had sex with someone else long before they recover from the fact that they have been deceived, that their partner has broken the bond and connection they once shared and developed it with someone else.

The old-fashioned definition of an affair was "sexual intercourse" with someone other than their spouse. However, that narrow definition no longer fits the reality of today. An affair is still an "Affair" (with all its ramifications), whenever the relationship involves any kind of sexual activity - or is "sexually-charged" - or is a deep meaningful emotional connection, with or without sex.

Unfortunately, the therapist referred to in the above letter (who supports the husband's view that he didn't need to leave work since it was only an emotional affair) is one of many therapists who fail to be as effective in dealing with affairs as would be hoped. And this is especially true when it comes to dealing with "emotional affairs"—since not as much attention has been focused on the dangers of this type affair.

However, now there's a book that specifically sheds light on the extremely prevalent problem of emotional affairs. The book is titled NOT "Just Friends" by Shirley Glass. Here is an excerpt from this book.

"Eighty-two percent of the unfaithful partners I've treated have had an affair with someone who was, at first, 'just a friend.' Among the 350 couples I have treated, approximately 62% of unfaithful men met their affair partners at work. The significant news about these new affairs...is that they originate as peer relationships... Secret emotional intimacy is the first warning signs of impending betrayal."

I have written a Review of this book and posted it on my website, along with a link to Amazon.com for those who want to order it. I also contributed a quote for the back cover of the book in which I encourage everyone to read it. I highly recommend this book—not just for understanding "emotional affairs," but for solid information about all aspects of affairs.

Note: I have reviewed 10 other books on Affairs, so if you have not read about the other books I recommend, please check out my Reviews.

INTERNET AFFAIRS

Does the Internet bring on an affair?

Question:

What effect, if any, do you think the Internet plays in bringing on an affair?

Peggy's Response:

Frankly, the Internet plays a *big* part in leading to an affair. The mail I've received during the past couple of years has convinced me that the primary impact of the Internet on affairs is that people who *otherwise* would have been highly unlikely to have had an "opportunity" to be tempted to have an affair are now innocently going online and entering chat rooms—just out of curiosity.

I've repeatedly heard stories (especially from women) who are not unhappy in their marriages and who are not "looking for an affair"—but who nevertheless get caught up in the general atmosphere of closeness that can develop on the Internet and go far beyond where they ever wanted (or intended) to go.

Most people who have heard about the risks of going online think "it can't happen to me." And others who go online are completely unaware of the risks of simply going into a chat room, noticing someone who sounds like they think exactly like you, beginning to talk one-on-one—and then proceeding to get closer and closer to this new "stranger" who may feel like a "soulmate."

There's a certain fantasy-like nature of relationships on the Internet, but unfortunately, they tend to eventually infringe on real-life, creating all kinds of havoc. In fact, where previously the workplace was the primary place where people "connected" and developed an affair, today (and for the foreseeable future) it's the Internet.

Can you fall in love on the Internet?

Question:

Can you fall in love with someone on the Internet? I never in a million years thought anything like this would happen to me. I have never met this person, but we have communicated both "online" and on the phone for almost a year. We are both married and have children. I decided last week to end it, and I did. But I miss him so much; I feel lost. Is what I felt really love?

Peggy's Response:

It's clear that this is a difficult decision to have made and it's understandable to feel somewhat lost." It's normal to get carried away with a relationship that develops like this. Perhaps the loss will be easier to bear by continuing the effort to rationally assess what happened and the feelings about it.

As to the question, "Is what I felt really love?" the answer is both "yes" and "no." It's a form of love, but it's just the first stage, not the deeper love that develops over time. All too often we think of "love" only as the initial "heady feelings of love." Falling in love (or "new love") produces some of the most intense feelings a person will ever experience, but it doesn't last. While it may be a fantastic experience, much of the intensity of the feeling is inherent in its newness and novelty. Once a "fantasy" love takes on all the real-life responsibilities of a long-term relationship, the feelings either make the transition into the next, deeper stage of love, or they wither. So comparing the feelings in a new relationship with the feelings of a long-term marriage is like comparing apples and oranges.

It also may be helpful to recognize that any new connection is going to be exciting, and it may not be the particular person who makes the difference. It has more to do with the excitement generated by this "star-crossed lovers" kind of relationship than to any specific feelings about a real person. In any new relationship (whether or not it begins online), people present the best sides of themselves. It's not indicative of the whole person functioning in the real world. Perhaps recognizing that it's the loss of a "fantasy" relationship can help diminish the intensity of the feelings of loss.

Also, this kind of experience provides an opportunity to rethink all aspects of our lives and determine what we can do to feel more "alive" that is rooted in reality and does not come with such a high price. It's worth seeking to find some other avenue for igniting the positive "alive" feelings that are a big part of what's involved in the feelings of loss.

What about his "online" relationships?

Question:

What can I do about my husband's online friendships (at least that what he calls it)! I'm anxious and scared about where it might lead—or where it might have already led. I don't know what to do.

Peggy's Response:

All too often, an online "friendship" is the first step in an interaction that almost inevitably leads to "more." There is a fairly predictable pattern to online relationships. Most people kid themselves that it won't get out of hand and that it's harmless. After it does get out of hand and develops beyond what was originally intended, it's often too late.

A person (like the one who wrote) is often hesitant to make a big deal out of a spouses' seemingly innocent activities. But understanding the progressive nature of online relationships provides an opportunity to avoid greater difficulties later. Fortunately, this person is already alert to the potential problems. By raising the question now (hopefully before things have gone "too far"), perhaps the typical pattern can be avoided.

The safest way to see that online interactions don't damage the primary relationship is to make sure that no online interactions are "secret." This means getting your partner to agree that neither of you will say anything to someone online that you aren't willing for the other one to read. And if they resist and invokes "privacy" rights, it's probably because they already have something to hide. Then it's reasonable to be concerned—and to openly discuss those concerns in an effort to avoid escalation of the situation.

Even if there's nothing "serious" to hide at the moment, continuing to keep these interactions "secret" just increases the chances that they will eventually reach the point where "hiding" become essential. So even though it's difficult to confront this issue (and the reaction may be quite negative), the situation is likely to get even worse and become even more difficult to address after more time has passed. Infatuations with online relationships can become addictive; and the longer it goes on, the stronger the habit is likely to become. There's a certain fantasy about online relationships that needs to be acknowledged and filtered through the reality of the potential consequences in the real world.

What can I say to him about his online "friendships?"

Question:

I know I need to talk to my husband about his online "friendships," but I don't know HOW. I need some help in figuring out just what I need to say to get him to actually address this issue.

Peggy's Response:

My thoughts on effectively addressing the question of "how" to communicate about this (or ANY difficult issue) is in keeping with the ideas I used in the "assertiveness training" I did back in the 70s. What I learned was that I could tell people the "correct" words to use and "correct" body language, etc. to be "assertive"—but none of it worked unless it came from the "inside out." In other words, your ability to communicate has more to do with your attitudes and beliefs about your "right to know" and the degree of "equality" in the relationship (or lack thereof) and the degree of "caring" involved between the two people than in whatever actual words you use. All these things are far more important than the "skills." You can't just "put on the skills like a coat" and have them work. As I said, the words need to come from the inside out.

Another similarity between how to talk about an issue like this and how to talk in an assertive manner is that even if you say everything "just right" (in accordance with the guidelines for using good communication skills), there is no guarantee that the other person will receive it in the way it is intended. (For instance, with assertiveness, someone could perfectly execute an "assertive" conversation and still have it be interpreted as being "aggressive.")

One way of determining the specific words that are more likely to be effective is to think in terms of the "ego states" as defined by transactional analysis: "parent, adult, and child." You'll have more likelihood of success by approaching the discussion from an "adult," problem-solving way of talking, while avoiding using the "judgmental" words of a "parent" or the "hurt feelings" words of a "child."

The bottom line is that you don't need specific communication skills so much as you need to approach any conversation with a certain attitude: that the clear goal is to "improve the relationship" rather than to just "criticize" and/or "change" the other person. With that spirit, you have a better chance of success; without it, all the communication skills in the world won't be enough.

Is cyber-sex an affair?

Question:

Would you consider cyber-sex a form of cheating on your spouse?

Peggy's Response:

It really doesn't matter whether "I" consider cyber-sex a form of cheating; it's whether the spouse of the person involved in the cyber-sex would consider it cheating. In general, any kind of behavior with sexual overtones that is kept secret from the spouse feels like an affair to the spouse if/when they find out about it.

People often think as long as the spouse doesn't know about the activity, then there's no problem. But keeping this kind of secret usually creates distance between the couple and interferes with the degree of closeness in the relationship. Also, regardless of what is believed (or even intended) regarding cyber-sex, it has a way of taking on a life of its own that takes on more and more importance in the overall scheme of things.

Eventually, the activity is usually discovered by the spouse—and usually the person engaging in cyber-sex tries to convince their spouse that it's harmless. But it seldom feels harmless to the spouse; they are often very hurt and upset by this discovery. So at this point, there is a much more important problem than the cyber-sex: the question of whether consideration of the spouse's feelings leads to abandoning the behavior. If there is not a willingness to stop the activity for the sake of the partner's feelings, it often leads the partner to feel unloved, as if their feelings don't matter.

Unfortunately, seemingly innocent cyber relationships are damaging (or outright killing) many, many marriages. So it really doesn't matter whether or not it is "defined" as cheating.

How can I confront my wife's Internet affair?

Question:

My wife is having an Internet affair. Initially it was one-sided from my wife, now closeness is consolidating. They were just friends before I met my wife 25 years ago. He is living in a country thousands of miles away. My wife contacted him last year when she came to know about him by chance. I have discovered her affair from her emails in the computer. When asked, she denied any wrongdoing. I can't show e-mails for fear of accusation of intruding her privacy. I am suffering; what should I do?

Peggy's Response:

When someone gets involved in an Internet affair, it tends to "take on a life of its own"—gradually escalating. (See the article posted on the website titled "Online Affairs" for a typical scenario.) Therefore, it's better to take action to confront the affair sooner rather than later.

This still leaves the issue of acknowledge seeing the e-mails leading to an "accusation of intruding her privacy." Since people involved in affairs will use whatever they can find to deflect attention from their own actions, it's true that there is often an effort to find some way to "turn it around" and criticize the partner for something.

But there's no reason to accept this kind of criticism, because it's completely reasonable and justifiable to "intrude on the privacy" of a person having an affair. In fact, this is *not* an "intrusion of privacy;" it's an "exposure of secrecy." (Privacy and secrecy are not the same, and this kind of secretive behavior does not fall under any legitimate definition of privacy.)

Another reason to address this issue sooner rather than later is that it's not sufficient to "wait it out." Allowing the secrecy to continue only serves to support a continuation (or escalation) of the relationship. And even if the current relationship might eventually end without a confrontation, people develop patterns of behavior—which means there's likely to be some future Internet affair if/when this one ends.

Finally, no one deserves to be in the position of constantly being fearful and anxious about the secret (not private) behavior of their spouse. So it's not only reasonable, but appropriate to confront the behavior that is leading to such anxiety. And there is certainly no basis for feeling guilty about doing so.

Where can I find information about online affairs?

Question:

Can you please give information about online affairs or where to look it up on your site.

Peggy's Response:

I have addressed the issue of online affairs in many previous Questions, so I'll review some of the main points again.

I see the dark side of Internet-based romances through the many messages I receive about the pain they create. In fact, I see the Internet as having a huge impact on extramarital affairs. The Internet is becoming the newest, strongest "pick-up" place around these days. And it's so easy to get caught up in it that many people don't know what hit them until it's too late. Most people are not seeking sex when they go online and go into a chat room. However, this is a big part of the problem (that people don't intend to get involved sexually)—but that's often the eventual result.

The person involved in online interactions may have no intention of letting it become inappropriate—and may deny (even to themselves) that it is becoming inappropriate, even as it is getting out of hand. Regardless of what is believed (or even intended) regarding online relationships, they have a way of taking on a life of their own that takes on more and more importance in the overall scheme of things. Unfortunately, seemingly innocent online relationships are damaging (or outright killing) many, many marriages.

Many people try to rationalize that online affairs are not really affairs—since they don't involve sex (at least not in the beginning). However, any kind of behavior with sexual overtones that is kept secret from the spouse feels like an affair to the spouse if/when they find out about it. And even if the spouse doesn't know about it, keeping this kind of secret usually creates distance between the couple and interferes with the degree of closeness in the relationship.

The safest way to see that online interactions don't damage the primary relationship is to make sure that no online interactions are secret. This means not saying anything to someone online that you aren't willing for your spouse to read. Whenever someone invokes privacy rights, it's probably because they have something to hide. (Hiding online relationships is not privacy; it's secrecy.) And even if there's nothing "serious" happening at the moment, continuing to keep these interactions "secret" just increases the chances that they will eventually escalate as described in my "online affairs scenario" (mentioned above) that is posted on the website.

Infatuations with online relationships can become addictive; and the longer it goes on, the stronger the habit is likely to become. So even though it may be difficult to confront this issue, the situation is likely to get even worse and become even more difficult to address after more time has passed. There's a certain fantasy about online relationships that needs to be acknowledged and filtered through the reality of the potential consequences in the real world.

What about still keeping her email a secret?

Question:

After my wife's affair, she still keeps her email a secret. She says she still has the right to her privacy, although she claims she's not having any contact with the person she had the affair with. Is this a red flag?

Peggy's Response:

While this is not necessarily an indication that there is continuing contact with the third party—it's a huge red flag as to the lack of openness and honesty in the relationship. It's astounding how often people use claims of privacy, which are not really about privacy at all, but are actually about secrecy.

For instance, a reasonable "right to privacy" involves having some time alone and not having personal space intruded upon. But there is *no* right to "secrecy" in a love relationship—because secrecy is about keeping something hidden or concealed from your partner.

This kind of secrecy is the opposite of honesty—because (as I've written many times) honesty is more than just "not lying." It's "not withholding relevant information." So withholding information by way of claiming privacy for email is simply a way of being dishonest—which is especially unwarranted after having had an affair. The unwillingness to do whatever is needed to reestablish trust (including sharing email) shows a failure to accept responsibility for their behavior and for doing everything possible to support their partner's recovery and rebuild trust.

It's important to recognize that there are real benefits to this kind of "responsible honesty;" it's not just "giving up privacy." It can lead to huge pay-offs, allowing two people to really know each other by sharing their deepest hopes, fears and dreams on an ongoing basis. This can be especially helpful in reconnecting after the distance created by the affair. And an extra benefit is that by dropping all the barriers and allowing deep intimacy, a couple's sex life can be far more exciting and fulfilling.

WORKPLACE AFFAIRS

How can I deal with an affair at work?

I continuously receive questions related to "workplace affairs."

I have printed a few of them below before addressing this issue.

Question #1

I sometimes wonder if my husband is having an affair with someone he works with, how would I know for sure? He is late, not really late, but late sometimes from work and when asked why he gets upset or says he drove slow, sometimes doesn't seem to want anything to do with me, and I have found women's email addresses in his notepad from work. Help! How can I be sure...

Question #2

My husband had an affair 2 years ago with a coworker. I have had a great deal of anger towards him because I cannot trust him and feel that he is hiding things from me and not being truthful. He kept reassuring me that he wasn't talking to her anymore. Recently he changed jobs which was a great relief only to find out that she also got a job at the same company. He said the physical relationship ended 2 yrs ago and that they are friends, he can't hurt her feelings. HELP

Question #3

My husband had an affair with a woman at work. I confronted him and he and I have been trying to work things out. However, I have found that he still keeps in contact with this woman. I have told him that it will never work between us as long as he continues to keep in touch with her. He tells me that he's stopped but he hasn't. I think he is sick. Is there such a sickness that makes men do this?

Question #4

How can you feel secure in your marriage after an affair if they both work in the same place but different office (but close enough)?

Question #5

Do you have any documented proof that a marriage can be rebuilt even if spouse remains friends with his ex-lover in the workplace? My husband says that he cannot control if ex-lover wants to talk to him at work but he has control over his actions. I can't deal with him communicating with her on any basis. Please offer some help.

Peggy's Response:

I have addressed this issue of workplace affairs several times in the past—but it continues to be one of the most prevalent types of questions I receive. So I'll try to recap some of the basics.

The above letters reflect some of the keys issues: suspicion of a workplace affair, dealing with continued contact after the end of the affair and rebuilding the marriage. So I'll include information that addresses these different areas.

Suspicion of a workplace affair:

This is a legitimate area of concern—because office affairs are extremely common. In fact, prior to the advent of "online affairs," it was the primary area of contact leading to affairs. (At this point, both the workplace and online are leading arenas for the development of affairs.)

One reason for the prevalence of workplace affairs is the sheer amount of time and energy spent at work—and the closeness that can develop when people share a commitment to some interesting and/or exciting project (or even possibly share a boredom with a stagnant environment). The point is that there is a shared experience and constant exposure to someone else that is separate from the personal life of spouse/family.

Some people (particularly men) are able to compartmentalize their lives and feel that "one has nothing to do with the other." This means there's less of a sense of staying connected to the spouse while at work, almost as if the spouse doesn't exist. (For instance, I remember many years ago when James was having affairs, he specifically didn't want to talk to me during the workday unless it was a real emergency. It's now clear that this made it more convenient and comfortable to keep his two separate "lives" really separate.

Another factor in workplace affairs is that when others (whether peers or bosses) are having affairs, it creates an "environment" where affairs are more likely. It may seem as if this is the "norm"—part of the "culture" and contributes to a person's ability to rationalize that they could have an affair too. This is not to place the "blame" for an affair on the work environment—only to acknowledge that it's more likely that a person can reconcile the idea of having an affair when in a culture where affairs seem to be happening without serious consequences. This influence may be so subtle that a person is not even aware of the impact of being impacted by others' actions. (Note: This is not an "excuse" for affairs; it just helps understand how they can happen.)

Dealing with continued contact after the end of the affair—and rebuilding the marriage

Work is often cited as a reason for continuing contact with the third party. However, one of the most common (and troubling) issues related to recovering from a partner's affair is when the third party continues to have some kind of presence in the couple's life.

Severing contact with the third party is a key factor in rebuilding trust. Until that connection is broken, it's unlikely that a couple can begin to heal the wounds of an affair. (The only totally valid reason for continuing contact is if/when a child results from an affair. Clearly, when children are involved, this calls for considering the needs of the child.)

During the many years I've worked with couples on issues related to recovering from affairs, the two primary factors I've observed that determine whether or not marriages survive and develop into a satisfying relationship for both parties are: 1) when the person who had an affair is willing to answer your questions and 2) when they are willing to sever all contact with the third party.

If a person has had an extramarital affair, any continuing interaction with the affair partner prevents the healing of the primary relationship—because it's like constantly pulling off a scab to expose a gaping wound. Even if there is no further sexual contact, it shows an insensitivity to the pain this causes—and undermines any "lip service" given to caring about the spouse and the marriage. So anyone who wants to maintain their marriage needs to clarify their priorities, make a clear choice (and act on that choice)—before it's too late.

There's often an effort to "justify" the need to continue a relationship based on proximity due to work, family, social circle or neighborhood. But people who are serious about healing their marriages often go to whatever lengths necessary to demonstrate that their marriage is their first priority—even if it means changing jobs, homes, or cities. None of this is easy, but it's a part of the process of dealing with the natural consequences of an affair.

Women having affairs at work:

Finally, I want to note that the questions posed all seemed to have been from wives whose husbands' had office affairs. However, women involved in affairs at work are not just the single woman with the married man. There are also many married women involved in workplace affairs. And in addition to the same problems in the marriage related to an affair at work, women also face some special job-related problems due to having a workplace affair—as do men.

(I worked as a corporate consultant for many years, and saw these issues up close.) The specific work-related risk for men is due to the kind of "misunderstanding" that can lead to charges of sexual harassment when the affair ends. And the specific work-related consequence for women is that when an affair in the workplace ends (as it surely does), the woman is highly likely to lose her job.

A woman's release may be due to some sort of upheaval caused by the exposure of the affair—or simply due to the awkwardness of continuing to have her around once the affair is over. When one of the people involved in an affair loses their job, it's almost certainly going to be the woman—because a company usually prefers to retain the man who is more likely to be in a position of power. So a woman having an affair at work is in double jeopardy in that she is more vulnerable to both losing her job and losing her marriage.

What about affairs at work?

Question:

(I receive so many questions about "affairs at work"—both from concerned spouses as well as those involved in affairs at work—that I try to post some of them every 3 or 4 months and repeatedly comment on this issue that affects so many people.)

Here are some questions from people whose spouses are/were involved in workplace affairs:

Question # 1

My husband had an affair with a coworker. He insists it's over but they can still work together. Although I believe it's over - is it ever possible that these two people can continue platonically while seeing each other and working together?

Question # 2

My wife had an affair about 6 months ago. It was with a person she works with. I feel she should not speak or communicate with this person any longer unless it is job related. Am I being unreasonable to ask this?

Question # 3

My husband had a one-night affair with a co-worker of his. He says it was only one night. He has left to work things out in his own mind and says he is confused, but still believes in us. He is staying with the girl. He has told me that they are only friends and I believe him, but it is very hard to deal with. I know he will come back home, but I am worried about how I will get over this.

Question # 4

My husband and a coworker had a brief affair of approximately 3 months. Neither will quit their jobs and it is a small office. She is also married. My husband tells me that it was only physical - never emotional and the fact that a few other people in the office found out about it scared her into trying to make things work with her husband. My husband claims over and over that he loves me and that he feels nothing for her. But they continue to be friends and coworkers. What's your advice here?

Question # 5

We have been married for 16 years. My husband had an affair at work while the children and I were away for the summer. He promised to end the affair. He is over her at work but says he can't fire her, and she won't quit. Her husband knows nothing. When I go to visit him at work, she just comes into his office while we talk, knocking boxes around, making me move. My husband thinks this is ok. He took her on a day trip to do buying for work; he claims he did nothing. What do you think?

Question # 6

Two years ago I discovered my husband having an intense eight-month affair with a co-worker. They still work together, although contact has been kept minimal (two or three times a month). It is a physical job, which requires them to work closely at times. I have read many publications, but have found little on the subject. Each time they work together it reopens some pain. Otherwise, we have made much progress. Changing jobs is not an option.

Now here are some questions from those involved in workplace affairs:

Question # 7

I keep trying to end an affair with a co-worker but he keeps coming back into my life regardless of how many times I say that it is over. How can I get it across that it is finished but not hurt our working relationship?

Question # 8

How do you sever all contact with the third party and have to work with him/her? Although I still have feelings for him and I know he has feelings for me but we both wish to do the right thing by letting each other get on with our lives. I do not wish to have to avoid him.

Question # 9

What if I had an affair at work, ended the affair but cannot change jobs? Is it possible for me to just be friends with this person and keep my job?

Peggy's Response:

The workplace is one of the most fertile environments for affairs to take hold and become a big problem for everyone concerned. One study reported that 73 percent of men and 42 percent of women meet their extramarital affair partners at work. (I'll say more later about how affairs get started at work and how to prevent getting caught up in that process, but first I want to respond to the above questions that primarily deal with continued contact after the end of the affair.)

Work is often cited as a reason for continuing contact with the third party. But continued contact creates an environment of anxiety and uncertainty that interferes with healing just as continuing to scratch off a scab interferes with the healing of a physical wound. So severing contact with the third party is a key factor in successfully dealing with the fallout from an affair. Even if there is no further sexual contact, it shows an insensitivity to the pain this causes—and undermines any "lip service" given to caring about the spouse and the marriage.

This is not meant to diminish the importance of work in our lives. But the issue is far more significant than simply making a practical decision to stay in the job; it sends a signal that the job is a higher priority than the spouse or the relationship. Accepting responsibility for making the decision to sever contact with the third party (even if it means leaving the job) is a critical step toward addressing the damage to the relationship.

People who are serious about healing their marriages often go to whatever lengths necessary to demonstrate that their marriage is their first priority. I've known instances where people made extraordinary choices—changing careers, even moving to another city, etc. None of this is easy, but it's a part of the process of dealing with the natural consequences of an affair.

So the main task for everyone is to be clear about their priorities—and to recognize that the choices we make reflect our priorities in life. So anyone who wants to maintain their marriage needs to clarify their priorities, make a clear choice (and act on that choice)—before it's too late.

One reason for the prevalence of workplace affairs is the sheer amount of time and energy spent at work—and the closeness that can develop when people share a commitment to some interesting and/or exciting project (or even possibly share a boredom with a stagnant environment). The point is that there is a shared experience and constant exposure to someone else that is separate from the personal life of spouse/family.

Finally, this should not be construed as saying work-related affairs are inevitable. Quite the contrary. In fact, awareness of the potential can help prevent unintended liaisons from developing

in the first place. And couples who regularly communicate in an open and honest way about any temptations/concerns, etc., can avoid falling prey to this problem.

Questions about affairs at work?

Question:

(I receive lots of questions about affairs that begin in the workplace—so I'm printing excerpts from several of them before responding.)

Excerpt #1

My wife recently ended an affair, but will still, infrequently, receive phone calls from her former lover. They also cross paths briefly once or twice a week at her workplace. Am I right (or reasonable) to insist she maintains absolutely minimal contact with him?

Excerpt #2

My husband's affair was with someone in his and my workplace, and no one knows about it for sure but us and the other woman. It would absolutely cost him his job. It is over, and he has moved to another area so he no longer sees her. The problem is that I still have to see her in passing...

Excerpt #3

He says it's over, but the o/w still works for him. How can I trust that the relationship is strictly business and enjoy what I think we're rebuilding?

Peggy's Response:

Work is often cited as a reason for continuing contact with the third party. However, one of the most common (and troubling) issues related to recovering from a partner's affair is when the third party continues to have some kind of presence in the couple's life.

Severing contact with the third party is a key factor in rebuilding trust. Until that connection is broken, it's unlikely that a couple can begin to heal the wounds of an affair. (The only totally valid reason for continuing contact is if/when a child results from an affair. Clearly, when children are involved, this calls for considering the needs of the child.)

During the many years I've worked with couples on issues related to recovering from affairs, the two primary factors I've observed that determine whether or not marriages survive and develop into a satisfying relationship for both parties are: 1) when the person who had an affair is willing to answer your questions and 2) when they are willing to sever all contact with the third party.

If a person has had an extramarital affair, any continuing interaction with the affair partner prevents the healing of the primary relationship—because it's like constantly pulling off a scab to expose a gaping wound. Even if there is no further sexual contact, it shows an insensitivity to the pain this causes—and undermines any "lip service" given to caring about the spouse and the marriage. So anyone who wants to maintain their marriage needs to clarify their priorities, make a clear choice (and act on that choice)—before it's too late.

There's often an effort to "justify" the need to continue a relationship based on proximity due to work, family, social circle or neighborhood. But people who are serious about healing their marriages often go to whatever lengths necessary to demonstrate that their marriage is their first priority—even if it means changing jobs, homes, or cities. None of this is easy, but it's a part of the process of dealing with the natural consequences of an affair.

How can I prevent having an office affair?

Question:

How can I "actually" prevent an office affair? In my workplace my boss (female) is having an affair with the company's president. Since I started working there one of the Principal's has had his eyes on me, and I'll admit so have I. I can't sleep at night. I'm married and he's married. I don't want to do it. I feel I'm being tremendously influenced by female boss' actions. To make matters worse, I'm really satisfied in my work. I want to quit because I'm afraid to fall into an affair.

Peggy's Response:

Office affairs are extremely common. And *one* of the reasons is that when someone becomes aware of others (whether peers or bosses) who are having affairs, it creates an "environment" where are more likely. It *appears* that this is the "norm"—part of the "culture" and contributes to a person's ability to rationalize that *they* could have an affair too. This is not to place the "blame" for an affair on the work environment—only to acknowledge that it's more likely that a person can reconcile the idea of having an affair when in a culture where affairs *seem* to be happening without serious consequences.

All too often, people are not aware of the impact of being "influenced" by other's actions—but the writer of the above letter *does* see this influence by acknowledging that she's afraid to "fall into an affair."

While it may be difficult to lose a job that is really satisfying, this consideration needs to be weighed against the likelihood of losing the *marriage* if staying in the job leads to having an affair. Of course, there's also the realistic likelihood of eventually losing the job anyway if an affair with one of the top people in the company is undertaken. When an affair in the workplace ends (as it surely does), a woman in this kind of position almost invariably loses her job as well. This may be due to some sort of upheaval due to the exposure of the affair—or simply due to the awkwardness of continuing to have her around once the affair is over. (When *one* of the people involved in an affair loses their job, it's a sure bet it will be the woman in the position described above—not a man in a position of power.)

So the dilemma described above is not really so difficult when viewed long-term. It's probably more a question of leaving the job now or losing it later. For more information about this issue, the one of my Articles about Affairs, "Sex in the Office."

Why am I infatuated with my boss?

Question:

I am finding myself thinking about my boss all the time. I dream and day-dream about being with him. I love my husband and would never hurt him, so why am I so infatuated?

Peggy's Response:

This is a much more common situation than many people realize. Being infatuated with a boss usually relates to the powerful position of the boss's position in our lives. Women often have a great deal of admiration for a boss's ability and success and come to value him not only as a boss, but also as a friend and mentor. In addition, the boss often has a lot of control over a woman's future in terms of her economic well-being and her opportunities for advancement. This is not to say that women are trying to "sleep their way to the top." Most ambitious women today recognize that this is clearly not the best path to success. But the boss may play such an important part in a woman's life that she has difficulty separating their professional relationship from her personal feelings.

Many people who never "intend" to have an affair fail to take steps necessary to prevent it from happening. They let their private fantasies blind them to the reality of the consequences of their thinking. The very process of keeping the feelings "secret" tends to make them stronger. It allows for focusing *only* on the positive aspects of "being with" the boss and avoids focusing on the potential consequences. So talking about it (in whatever way can bring it into "reality" without creating additional problems) is probably a good way to cut through the fantasy. This "talking" can be with a professional or a friend or family member who can be totally trusted. There's something about discussing your thinking out loud (and seeing it through the eyes of someone else) that allows you to view it more realistically.

In the meantime, here are some "blinding glimpses of the obvious" about this kind of situation. Most affairs (whether in the office or not) eventually become some kind of problem, either because it becomes known to others or because it ends. When this happens, women are generally the ones who are penalized—and this is especially true when the man is her boss. When the affair with her boss ends, her job is also likely to end. Even more critical is the fact that her marriage may end as well. So even when there's a desire to avoid hurting the husband, continuing on a path as described above is almost guaranteed to do just that. So this is no time for pretending there's some way to continue this kind of situation without a very real risk to the marriage.

What if my secretary thinks of me as more than a boss?

Question:

What are some red flags to look for when I think my secretary is starting to think of me as more than a boss? We are very close and I depend on her a lot, but that's all it is. I am a very generous man, my wife says I flirt without knowing it, so maybe I have given her the wrong idea. Could she be reading more into my actions? I don't want to lose her in the office. But I don't want any office gossip to start. I value my reputation and love my wife dearly. What should I do?

Peggy's Response:

A very high percentage of affairs start through workplace contacts—so the above letter represents a very legitimate concern. Even more important is the fact that the writer of this letter recognizes that his secretary may have a different perception of their relationship from the one he holds. While neither I nor anyone else can tell him precisely how to extricate himself from this situation—it would be foolhardy not to find some way to change the current working situation. By the time a man senses these "red flags," it's likely to already be well on the way to becoming some kind of a problem.

The potential problem could take a number of different routes. First, a man like the one above could (despite his total lack of intention to do so) become more involved with the secretary than he intends. For many years I worked as a corporate consultant and observed many instances where boss/secretary relationships became so close that they eventually "crossed over the line." In fact, back about 35 years ago I experienced first-hand what it was like to become enamoured of my boss—so I realize that no one is immune and anyone is vulnerable. The kind of close working relationship described above can be extremely dangerous—both in risk to professional reputation and to family.

Also, if there's a lack of clarity about the nature of the relationship due to the different perceptions of the boss and the secretary, there's always the possibility of this kind of misunderstanding leading to a charge of "sexual harassment." Having done training in corporations on "Preventing Sexual Harassment," I know that any ambiguity about a male-female relationship on the job is a recipe for potential trouble.

Finally, of course, there's the realistic concern about potential harm to the wife if any kind of trouble develops from this situation. So the bottom line is that it's important to take some kind of definitive action to change the nature of the building tension that is almost inevitable—in order to defuse any significant ramifications. It's unwise, both personally and professionally, to sit back and hope that it will resolve itself—since without intervention it will almost certainly get even more complicated.

As to the specific nature of the actions to take, that depends on the individual situation and the people involved. But bringing a degree of openness and clarity is the first step—and this probably should *not* be done privately between the two people, but done in the context of a business—like review of the situation with those in the organization who are responsible for monitoring "human resource" efforts. This openness might also involve including the wife—in that the more open discussion of the whole issue, the more likely the boss is to be "accountable" to taking responsible action to alleviate the potential threat inherent in such a situation.

How can I deal with the continued contact?

Question:

How can I deal with the fact that my husband had a work-related affair—when there is no chance of finding a position elsewhere? The sexual aspect of the affair is over, but the emotional part is still going on. They do a lot of work together which necessitates their working together on a daily basis as well as potentially taking business trips together or attending conferences together. There is no possibility of their ending their business relationship.

Peggy's Response:

The points that strikes me most about this letter are these two absolute statements:

- when there is no chance of finding a position elsewhere...
- there is no possibility of their ending their business relationship...

These statements reflect an attitude that nothing can be done; that there is NO choice to be made. However, *everything* (except perhaps death and taxes) involves choice. We may not like the consequences of the choices, but we have them nevertheless. So it's a matter of deciding which consequences you are willing to live with.

In fact:

1. Everyone can always make choices about anything.
2. Every choice involves consequence and/or tradeoffs.

So here's an analysis of some choices and their consequence/tradeoffs:

When there is a choice to place the well-being of spouse/family/personal life over professional or financial well-being—the *likely* results are immediate (perhaps temporary, perhaps permanent) loss of income/assets/business potential.

When there is a choice to place professional or financial well-being over the well-being of spouse/family/personal life—the *likely* results are unending pain to the spouse on two fronts: due to the meaning (in terms of what is most valued) behind the choice itself—and due to the fact that as a result of this choice, they are likely to suffer anxiety/uncertainty/suspicion/pain on an ongoing basis.

The main task for everyone is to be clear about their priorities—and to recognize that the choices we make reflect our priorities in life. This is especially true when dealing with affairs. One of the key factors in whether or not marriages are able to rebuild is determined by whether or not all contact with the third party is severed. (Of course, people can and do stay married without this happening—but it's usually either a very strained or a deadened/meaningless marriage.)

The only exceptions to the general rule of needing to sever all contact is when the third party is a relative or when there is a child resulting from the affair. These obviously create additional considerations. But in the much-more-common scenario where the third party connection is through work, it comes down to which is more important: work or family. I've known instances where people made extraordinary choices—changing careers, even moving to another city, etc. It all comes down to choice.

How can I cope with them working together?

(I'm posting 3 questions about the same issue before my response.)

Question: #1:

My wife has admitted to an affair with a co-worker, she has been very honest and has ended the affair. But she is frustrated about severing contact by leaving her job. She is very career-oriented and thinks she can continue to work with the third party. How should I take the importance of her career. Its seems her career is more important than our relationship.

Question: #2:

My husband was caught having an affair with a co-worker. We have stayed together, attend church & I hope we can work it out forever. I still have trouble forgetting about it since he still works with the same woman day after day. Should I demand he find another job. He says he never sees or talks to her. I'm doubtful after all the lying.

Question: #3:

My wife had an affair with someone we both work with closely. (We all work in the same office.) Though she has ended it, and chosen our relationship, I still have to interact with him everyday and see them together. I'm having a hard time dealing with it. Is it fair to ask her to find new employment? I know I want to.

Peggy's Response:

While there are rare exceptions (like when an affair involves another family member or when a child results from an affair), in general, severing contact with the third party is an essential step in supporting the spouse's recovery from the emotional impact of this experience.

It's not just that a person should sever contact; it's simply a fact that in most instances continuing to have any kind of contact with the third party serves to inflame the already raw emotions. Severing contact is a critical determinant of the degree to which the emotions can subside. Ongoing contact feels like "adding insult to injury," leading to continuing the pain of the initial discovery. Until that connection is broken, it's unlikely that a couple can begin to heal the wounds from the affair.

Refusing to leave the job has a very negative impact on the ability to rebuild trust. If you can't trust a person to do what's needed to relieve the current pain based on past actions, it's hard to trust them to protect you against pain in the future from future actions. This is interpreted as a sign of a lack of compassion and caring; and a failure to leave the job is felt as a further rejection.

Of course, work is important in our lives—both as a source of pride and self-esteem as well as a source of financial security. But the issue is far more significant than simply making a practical decision to stay in the job; it sends a signal that the job is a higher priority than the spouse or the relationship. Accepting responsibility for making the decision to sever contact with the third party (even if it means leaving the job) is a critical step toward addressing the damage to the relationship.

Is it normal to feel so resentful?

Question:

I found out six months ago that my husband was having an affair with a woman at his office. This woman still works there and as far as I know everything is over between them. My husband and I have been in counseling since then. Counseling has helped since then; however I still feel that both of them got off "free," she still works there, he has his family back and the only one suffering is me. Is it normal to feel so resentful?

Peggy's Response:

Since dealing with a spouse's affair is so emotionally devastating, it's understandable (and normal) to experience a wide range of emotions, including resentment. This is especially true so soon (only six months) after learning about the affair. As I have repeatedly pointed out, it usually takes at least two years to overcome the emotional impact—even when both people are completely committed to the effort.

One thing that can help this process is for the person who had an affair to do everything possible to help diminish the time and intensity of their spouse's painful feelings. One important step in diminishing these feelings is to completely sever all contact with the third party.

It's very difficult to deal with the pain when there is any contact, regardless of the nature of the contact. In other words, it's not necessarily the degree to which ongoing contact is a real threat to the marriage. Rather, it's that a failure to "do whatever it takes" to sever all contact feels like a failure to care about the spouse's feelings.

It's tempting for people to protest that they "can't change jobs." But many people have, in fact, changed jobs and made other significant moves. It's all a matter of priorities. In fact, when something like career concerns takes precedence over the spouse's well-being, it sends a strong message about priorities, often compounding the initial feelings of lack of caring and even rejection.

It's important to clarify that this is not a matter of "punishment;" it's a matter of the person who had an affair being willing to accept responsibility for their actions, which means not leaving their spouse to suffer so many painful consequences while avoiding consequences of their own.

Naturally, this one act (severing all contact with the third party) will not suddenly make the resentment disappear. But it can go a long way toward feeling that the sense of "loss" is not limited only to the person who experienced the most hurt in the first place. And it can set the stage for the long process of successfully rebuilding the marriage.

Finally, I'd like to add a personal note about the feeling that a spouse is "getting off free"—since my husband also "got his family back" and his life went on without undue suffering. One way I dealt with that was to recognize that (while I wish this had never happened at all), since it did happen, I could be thankful that I was not the one dealing with the realization of having brought the kind of pain to him that he had brought to me. So as hard as it was to be in my position, I would not have wished to be in his shoes. Recognizing that I wouldn't want to trade places for anything in the world helped diminish any feelings of resentment that he got off "free."

What if he still works with the other woman?

Question:

I discovered my husband was involved in an inappropriate relationship with a co-worker. I found out early on in their relationship and have since confronted him. He says that things had not gotten physical yet and that he has ended the relationship. The problem is he still works with her. I wanted him to quit his job but was scared of the financial hardship that would result. Is there any hope or is it inevitable that he will always be tempted by her and possibly give in to the temptation?

Peggy's Response:

While the specific question above relates to how the husband might deal with continuing to work with the other woman (whether "he will always be tempted by her"), another important consideration is how the *wife* might deal with their continuing to work together.

Continued contact creates an environment of anxiety and uncertainty that interferes with healing just as continuing to scratch off a scab interferes with the healing of a physical wound. So whether or not there is any future involvement, the past involvement continues to be a problem for the spouse. One of the key factors in rebuilding the marriage is "severing contact with the third party."

The last time I addressed this issue, I noted the "financial" complications involved in changing jobs. But since this is a common reason cited for the inability to sever contact after a work-related affair, I'll repeat some of my earlier comments:

Of course, work is important in our lives—both as a source of pride and self-esteem as well as a source of financial security. But the issue is far more significant than simply making a practical decision to stay in the job; it sends a signal that the job is a higher priority than the spouse or the relationship. Accepting responsibility for making the decision to sever contact with the third party (even if it means leaving the job) is a critical step toward addressing the damage to the relationship.

It all comes down to choice. I've known instances where people made extraordinary choices—changing careers, even moving to another city, etc. The main task for everyone is to be clear about their priorities—and to recognize that the choices we make reflect our priorities in life."

To return to the initial question about the possibility of the husband's temptation in the future...she reported that "He says that things had not gotten physical yet." The wife's concerns are reasonable, based on the following quote from psychiatrist, Dr. Scott Haltzman:

Seventy-three percent of unfaithful men meet their mistresses at work. Most people don't choose to have an affair; some may even be morally opposed to affairs. Frequently it starts with a conversation. Then, it moves to a conversation about intimate issues and experiences in each person's own relationship. The distance between meeting someone and a first kiss is much longer than the distance between a first kiss and ending up in bed. It's a slippery slope, and you make choices all along the way.

Finally, this should *not* be construed as saying work-related affairs are inevitable. Quite the contrary. In fact, awareness of the potential can help prevent unintended liaisons from developing in the first place. And couples who regularly communicate in an open and honest way about any temptations/concerns, etc., can avoid falling prey to this problem.

When is it justified to live apart?

Question:

When is it justified to consider living apart when working through the process of an affair? It is in the very early days of our experience. I only found out two months ago. It is a problem with addiction to this woman he can't break away from in an emotional sense. He is also reluctant to work anywhere else - she is a co-worker.

Peggy's response:

In general, any effort to recover and rebuild following an affair is most effective when a couple continue to live together. When first discovering an affair, some people feel a need for a few days apart just to deal with the initial shock, but the sooner a couple begin working together to deal with the situation, the more likely they will be able to make progress.

However, significant progress is almost impossible unless/until all contact with the third party has been severed. (Note that severing contact is one of the key factors in rebuilding trust.) Even if there is no further sexual contact, it shows an insensitivity to the pain this causes—and undermines any "lip service" given to caring about the spouse and the marriage.

Severing contact is all the more important if there is an "emotional addiction" to the other woman. Continued exposure to her at work does *not* bode well for breaking that emotional bond, making it all the more important that they no longer work together. I've written many times in the past about how people claim that continued contact is necessary due to a job situation. But people who are serious about rebuilding their marriages often go to whatever lengths necessary—even if it means changing jobs. Of course, this is not easy, but it's a part of taking responsibility for the natural consequences of an affair.

So a situation like the one described above (where he is reluctant to change jobs) is a "justifiable" reason for considering living apart. I would, however, urge each person to decide the best of course of action based on what they think is the "smartest" action (leading toward the best outcome) rather than just what is "justifiable."

So here are some other factors to consider when deciding whether to live apart. It's helpful to determine in advance if there will be a specific period of time to be spent apart before reassessing the next step—whether to move back together or to move toward formal separation and/or divorce. (Without advance planning, things have a way of "taking on a life of their own" and getting somewhat out of control.)

It's also wise to consider that "in the early days" (as mentioned above), there's likely to be such emotional turmoil that a decision to live apart may be based more on emotions than on having made a thoughtful decision. There's a tendency for living separately to further weaken the "emotional connection" within the couple, thereby inadvertently feeding the "emotional connection" with the other woman. It may also make it more awkward to interact in a reasonable way and more difficult to get down to the serious business of talking through the whole situation and exploring the possibilities for the future.

However, each person must make their own decision (based on their own personal priorities)—because each of us must live with the consequences of our own decisions.

Still working with the third party?

Question #1:

Am I being a fool? He still works with her on a daily basis, but he says he has shut down all feeling toward her in this way. That it was a friendship that crossed a line.

Question #2:

My husband had an affair with a coworker. He insists it's over but they can still work together. Although I believe it's over - is it ever possible that these two people can continue platonically while seeing each other and working together?

Peggy's Response:

I would never use a word like "fool" to describe someone trying to deal with any of the crazy-making aspects of a spouse's affair. But, in general it's "unwise" for there to be any continuing contact with the third party.

For most people, one of the key factors in whether or not the marriage is able to be rebuilt is whether or not all contact with the third party is severed. (Of course, people can and do stay married without this happening—but it puts a terrible strain on the marriage, leaving it to further deteriorate rather than being rebuilt.)

In most instances continuing to have any kind of contact with the third party serves to inflame the already raw emotions. Severing contact is a critical determinant of the degree to which the emotions can subside. Ongoing contact feels like "adding insult to injury," leading to continuing the pain of the initial discovery. Until that connection is broken, it's unlikely that a couple can begin to heal the wounds from the affair.

Many people will say (and may believe) that they can switch to a "platonic" relationship with a former affair partner, but that's actually irrelevant—because even if there is no further sexual contact, it shows an insensitivity to the pain this causes the spouse. The ongoing contact is like constantly pulling off a scab to expose a gaping wound and doesn't allow the "past" to actually be left in the past.

So contact of any kind adversely affects the quality of the marital relationship and prevents the rebuilding of trust. In fact, in most cases the strength of the connection between the married couple is strongly correlated with the *lack* of connection between the person who had an affair and the third party.

There's often an effort to "justify" the need to continue a relationship based on the need to have contact at work. But people who are serious about healing their marriages often go to whatever lengths necessary to demonstrate that their marriage is their first priority—even if it means changing jobs. It all comes down to choice. (I've known instances where people made extraordinary choices—changing jobs, even moving to another city, etc.) None of this is easy, but it's a part of the process of dealing with the natural consequences of an affair.

What about workplace Christmas parties?

Question:

Should husband who had affair with coworker go to Christmas party where she would be?

Peggy's Response:

I assume this question was submitted just for confirmation of what this wife already knows, but can't convince her husband: that he shouldn't go to the workplace Christmas party. While I don't generally like to talk in terms of "right" or "wrong," (preferring to point out what's "smart" or not), in this case I'll make an exception and just say: Clearly, he shouldn't go to the Christmas party. (Frankly, I have some serious concerns about workplace Christmas parties in general, but more about that later.)

This caution against attending a Christmas party in order to avoid contact with the third party is a "no-brainer." In fact, it's advisable for the person who had an affair to sever all contact with the third party and never see them again anywhere—not even at work, much less at a Christmas party.

I've often written about the importance of severing contact with the third party. See the following Articles posted on my website: "Rebuilding the Marriage after a Workplace Affair," "Steps to Restoring Trust," and "How Can You Ever Rebuild Trust after an Affair?"

The "Christmas Party" is just the most obvious of the areas of concern about the workplace as a prime arena for extramarital affairs. Back in the 70s and 80s (when I worked as a corporate consultant on male-female issues in the workplace), I saw the growing prevalence of workplace affairs.

But to focus specifically on the potential problems with workplace Christmas parties...

I personally experienced a great deal of (justified) anxiety about a Christmas party my husband's office had many years ago (in 1967 when he was having affairs). James and I wrote candidly about this particular episode in our book describing our own personal experience.

Below is an excerpt from our 1980 book, *Beyond Affairs*:

Peggy:

One situation I dreaded in particular was the office Christmas party James' work group held annually...without spouses. This year it was even worse than usual. We'd planned to go to dinner after the party. He was running so late I began to wonder if we'd still go, but I knew better than to call the office. I never questioned him or checked up on him like that. The wife of one of the other guys did call. Her husband told her he'd be home when he got there and she shouldn't call and bug him. She immediately called me to talk about it. While we didn't admit it to each other, I think we both felt anxious. I imagined all kinds of wild things happening—in keeping with my stereotypes about office parties.

When James finally came home, he'd obviously had a lot to drink. We did go to dinner with two other couples. One of the guys, who'd also been at the party, was so drunk he passed out during dinner. This just reinforced my suspicions about the party being wild.

James:

Yes, Virginia, office Christmas parties are as wild as people say they are—at least some of the time. By Christmas, 1967, I was deep into outside relationships. It was clear that Karen, a woman at the university, was eager to start an affair with me. I was attracted to her, but had

resisted becoming involved because I'd seen the complications of work-related and in-town affairs, and I wanted to avoid that.

So there I was at our Christmas bash, feeling good about life and feeling very content to enjoy drinking and dancing. We were a hard-working group and we frequently socialized together, so we got loose rather quickly. Late in the party I found myself in my office with Karen. Honestly, I didn't design this one. As the saying goes, she was all over me. I didn't offer much resistance. With a couple of drinks (and my brain below my belt), my reasoning went like this. "There's not much I can do about this—it's inevitable. All the guys in the office already know I cat around and we can probably keep the other women from finding out."

I had a vague awareness I was already late to pick up Peggy for a dinner engagement. I figured I could blame my lateness on the office party being slow to break up. After all, I was one of the hosts, and it wouldn't look good if I left early. Of all the crazy things I did in those years, this has to rank close to the top.

(end of excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*)

Not all parties are wild or even irresponsible, but it's a subject that tends to hold the potential for a lot of anxiety by the spouse who is not in attendance.

Whether or not there is any behavior that might threaten the marriage, an attitude of "not caring" about the feelings of the spouse is a problem in and of itself. So this issue is one that every couple needs to discuss in a responsible way to be clear about the precise nature of the gathering and what can be expected—and decide together how this (or any) separate social events are to be handled.

How do friends and coworkers deal with affair?

Question #1:

I am sure you have probably had this question before, but one of my best friends and I have ended our friendship due to her decade-long affair with her old boss. While I have known about it for a long time, my friend only told me five years ago. I am not judging her, but recently after hitting a rough patch in my own marriage, I can no longer stand being around her family and her husband knowing she is doing this. Plus it started getting really weird when she would ask me to call his office to see if he was in, or drive by for her. She would give her kids my number when she would meet the guy. I just could no longer do it. I felt guilty. I like her husband. Was I right to end the friendship?

Question #2:

My assistant is having an affair with the boss (married), how do I get rid of the bad feelings I have towards them? I'm very angry and disappointed at my boss. I'm sick to my stomach that my assistant would do such a thing! I have worked for the company for over 11 years and I have worked very hard. I can't believe that this has happened. What to do? A disappointed Manager.

Peggy's Response:

This week's questions are clear examples of the way affairs impact the lives of others. Since the questions describe slightly different situations, I will address them separately.

Re: Question #1...

When you are put in an untenable position, especially being expected to "cooperate" in the deception, it's completely reasonable (and "right") to remove yourself from this situation. If the friendship ends due to your need to avoid dealing with this situation, it's not really your fault that this has happened. The responsibility for the situation lies completely with the person whose behavior has led to the untenable position.

Also, as for "not being around her family and her husband," that too is a reasonable and responsible decision—especially due to the awkwardness of cooperating in the secrecy (even if no longer actively cooperating in covering for the activity itself). As with ending the friendship, this is probably the best option among the poor set of alternatives with which you are faced.

When a person has an affair, any and all of the fallout from it is their responsibility—not the responsibility of those who are affected by their actions. So while it's sad to have to give up a friendship, it's even sadder to think that a former friend is willing to put you in the position where this is your only reasonable choice.

Re: Question #2...

This is a difficult (and all too common) dilemma for people in the workplace. Unfortunately, there's no simple answer to this question, especially when one of the people involved in the affair is the boss. If a person who reports to you is involved in an affair, you are in a strong position to do something about it. You might be able to handle it personally, but certainly with the help of the Personnel Department.

But when the other party in the affair is the boss, any possible actions to address the situation are likely to be useless at best and risky at worst. (Bosses generally don't want an employee to comment on their "personal lives"—even when it impacts the work environment.) And it's also likely to be risky to consider going to the "boss's boss." Most companies don't really want to deal with this whole subject.

In general, it's smart to be aware of the dynamics that operate in most business environments. For instance, very few companies deal directly with the issue of sex in the office. If at all possible, they ignore it. In small companies, where it may be more difficult to ignore, there's more likelihood of action—but it's usually based on reacting to a given situation, not on having a clear policy. In most instances, it's simply not on the company's agenda as an issue to be dealt with.

One reason companies tend to avoid this issue is that monitoring people's personal lives is not generally seen as the responsibility of business unless it clearly interferes with productivity. It's only when other employees officially complain and demand that something be done that the company is likely to take action.

Basically, the company only addresses whatever sexual problems it is forced to deal with. Whatever effort the company makes toward curtailing sexual activity is usually in response to a specific demand from one or more individuals within the organization. And most of these demands take the form of complaints about sexual harassment rather than about affairs between two consenting employees.

Perhaps the most subtle, but most pervasive, reason companies don't take action in dealing with office affairs is that there is no separate entity called "The Company;" there are only individuals (usually men) in positions of authority. And many of these men are either involved in affairs themselves or are close personal friends with other men who are involved. Either way, they're less than eager to "rock the boat." Clearly, this is a sensitive issue that most people in business prefer to avoid. Since they feel there's no way they can win in dealing with it, they simply do nothing.

So dealing with the impact of a workplace affair usually comes down to deciding whether you can "exist" within this environment—or whether you need to seek another job. The bottom line is that there is no simple solution; each person must make their own decision about how to react.

P.S.

As with Question #1, sometimes a workplace affair can involve you in actively cooperating in the deception—which can make the whole situation even more stressful. (While some people have no problem with these situations, others experience ambivalence and frustration at being put in this position, especially if they see no reasonable way to avoid it.) One of the most prevalent instances of this is when those who work in a direct support role (and therefore invariably know a lot about the person's activities), are routinely called upon to "cover" for the affair and help protect the boss. People are often concerned that their job depends on doing as they are expected, and this is a realistic concern. So it's up to each individual to assess the situation for themselves to determine their degree of discomfort and to weigh these feelings against the practical concerns related to their career.

What about approaching a co-worker who is having an affair?

Question:

You have mentioned that secrecy about affairs keeps it alive. I work in a hospital where it is not uncommon for doctors to have affairs. Is it appropriate to approach a doctor who is carrying on an affair and let him know that this is wrong? I am speaking from experience...I wish the girls my husband worked with had spoken up and let him know it was wrong to be carrying on an affair with one of their coworkers. What do you think about this?

Peggy's Response:

The above question reflects the first step in more responsibly addressing the issue of affairs in our society: simply being honest with ourselves in acknowledging that our silence in situations like the one described above is one of the many subtle ways we all cooperate in sustaining the Code of Secrecy.

The key ingredient in Breaking the Code of Secrecy is to commit to no longer ignoring the affairs all around us (as the saying goes, "ignoring the elephant in the middle of the room"). So it's important to stop pretending it isn't happening and to speak up and acknowledge your awareness.

However, there's certainly a need to speak up in an effective way—one that has the greatest possibility for having a positive impact with the least possibility of negative personal consequences. (For instance, it's reasonable for someone to consider such practical concerns as the possibility of endangering their livelihood by being too confrontive in a work situation.)

However, this does *not* mean that a person can't speak up and say something in such situations. There are some guidelines that can help anyone struggling to determine how to handle something like this in the most responsible/effective way. One of the first issues is getting clear about Who, Why and How to Confront.

For instance, the specific question above, "Is it appropriate to approach a doctor who is carrying on an affair and let him know that this is wrong?" illustrates two serious problems. First, it's not appropriate to confront someone (other than a personal friend with whom you have a close relationship) with your personal opinion/judgment that their behavior is "wrong." It's simply not reasonable or effective to lecture co-workers about not meeting your personal standards of behavior.

The statement that a person makes needs to be about themselves—not about the other person. For instance, it's appropriate to say, "I feel uncomfortable with (or distracted by or uneasy about) working in an environment where affairs take place. I know I don't have the right to tell you what you should do; but I thought I should tell you how I feel and that I would not in any way "cover" for the affairs or "cooperate" in maintaining the secrecy about them."

Many people experience ambivalence and frustration at being expected to "cooperate" in the deception of affairs, especially if they see no reasonable way to avoid it. One of the most difficult situations is when people are expected to "cover" for co-workers. (For instance, secretaries invariably know a lot about the private lives of those for whom they work, and they are routinely called upon to help protect an affair. I know about this from first-hand experience as an executive secretary many years ago.)

Work-related affairs are extremely common, and they have an impact on many aspects of getting the job done. The concerns may cover a wide range of other issues: the amount of time an affair might take from a focus on business, special treatment or privileges that might accompany an affair, unfair distribution of labor by virtue of time spent on an affair, or just being distracted by

an affair. So, to return to the reasons/motives in "speaking up," these are legitimate (and potentially effectiveness points to make), not just saying it's "wrong."

The way in which your comments are received (and any potential positive impact) will rest in large part on the spirit in which the comments are offered. While there may still be some negative reaction at your speaking up, any approach other than the one described above will almost certainly do no good—and is likely to result in anger at your interference in something they see as none of your business. In other words, any effort to discuss this matter should neither be self-serving nor self-righteous. The effectiveness of anything that is said will be determined by the attitude with which it's approached.

The bottom line is that for someone like the writer of this question who feels uncomfortable in such a situation, there's no simple solution; each person must make their own decision about how to react. "After the fact" like the above situation, it's much more difficult to determine the best course of action. With more awareness about the impact of so much secrecy, we may be better prepared to face these situations and make a conscious decision as to how we plan to handle them.

For more information about affairs at work, see the article posted on the website titled "Sex in the Office."

Who do I tell when the Boss is having an affair?

Question:

My Boss is having an affair with his secretary. The environment is very unhealthy now. Who do I tell and how?

Peggy's Response:

This is a difficult (and all too common) dilemma for people in the workplace. For many years, the workplace was the number one environment for contacts that led to affairs. (That dubious distinction is rapidly being replaced by the contact that originates on the Internet.)

Unfortunately, there's no simple answer to the above question—especially when one of the people involved in the affairs is the Boss. Bosses generally don't want to hear complaints about their "personal lives" (even when it impacts the work environment), so expressing concerns about the situation directly to the Boss is probably useless at best and risky at worst. The same is true for expressing these concerns to the Boss's Boss.

That leaves the most likely place to turn being the Personnel Department. While it's possible to get some action when the issue is "sexual harassment," complaints about consensual sexual office liaisons are not likely to be welcomed. As for "how to tell," this kind of reporting would probably require an official complaint if there's to be any usefulness to reporting it at all—which, of course, sets into play a series of actions that get increasingly complicated. (I realize that all this sounds very discouraging, but having spent 10 years as a corporate consultant on male-female issues in the workplace, I know that it can be extremely difficult/challenging to find any good resolution to this dilemma.)

So a situation like this usually comes down to deciding whether you can "exist" within this environment—or whether you need to seek another job. (Since this kind of situation is so prevalent, there's no guarantee that a new job will solve the overall problem, but it might be an improvement over a situation where it's the Boss who is involved in an affair.)

Of course, sometimes a Boss's affair has a direct impact—in that you may be expected to "cooperate in the deception." (While some people have no problem with these situations, others experience ambivalence and frustration at being put in this position, especially if they see no reasonable way to avoid it.) One of the most prevalent instances of this is when secretaries (who invariably know a lot about the private lives of those for whom they work), are routinely called upon to "cover" for the affair and help protect the Boss.

I know about this from my own experience. Forty years ago when I worked as a secretary, putting James through graduate school, I found myself in this position several times. But in a situation like the one described in this letter (where it is the secretary who is involved in the affair with the Boss), the person who wrote this letter may not be expected to "cover" in the same way.

Some people are often concerned that their job depends on doing as they are expected, and this is a realistic concern. So it's up to each individual to assess the situation for themselves to determine their degree of discomfort and to weigh these feelings against the practical concerns related to their career.

For those people who feel uncomfortable in these situations, there's no simple solution; each person must make their own decision about how to react.

WHY AFFAIRS HAPPEN

Why do affairs happen?

Question:

Why does she keep saying "I don't know" when asked about the reasons for the affair?

Peggy's Response:

Wanting to know "Why" is a typical, understandable reaction to learning of a partner's affair. It's often so confusing (and crazy-making) that people become obsessed with understanding how it could have happened. There are several important reasons for this desire (Need!) to get an answer to this question. First, you feel like you can't recover if you don't know why. And second, you're afraid that if you don't know why it happened in the first place, what's to keep it from happening again!

If only the answer to this question were clear and easy to articulate. But it's seldom understood (even by the person who had the affair) and almost impossible to say anything that even remotely "makes sense"—because, frankly, nothing about affairs makes sense. It's an emotion-driven experience having nothing to do with any kind of rational thought.

So it may be a perfectly honest (although frustrating) response when the person who has had an affair says "I don't know why." But when there doesn't seem to be a clearly-identified reason, people may be so desperate to figure out why it happened that they latch on to any new idea, however far-fetched.

For instance, last week I read an article in USA Today that is a new twist on the old "the devil made me do it" line.

Below are some excerpts from the results of a small study they reported last week:

"It is more than a wandering eye that might cause a woman to stray. Feelings of lust actually may be rooted in women's biology. [The study] suggests an evolutionary tendency toward infidelity during ovulation, which is the most fertile part of the menstrual cycle.

"Women at midcycle report greater sexual attraction to men other than their partners. That is a result of the ancestral belief that good looks often equal good genes for offspring, so although the partner may be a good long-term mate and represent sought-after qualities in a father, a more physically attractive man may spark desire in ovulating women."

WARNING! Beware of studies that purport to explain precisely "why" someone has an affair—especially studies of 35 to 45 college women who are not even necessarily married. In fact, beware of any study that places too much emphasis on any one reason for an affair.

So why do affairs happen?

Anyone who has read much of my writing knows that I strongly contend that there is never just one reason. And any explanation that says "The affair happened because..." (and then completes it with one word or phrase)—is wrong, because it's incomplete. The reasons for affairs are always a combination of factors. To review the "3 sets of factors," see the article posted on the website titled: Who has affairs - and Why.

When reading these 3 sets of factors, you'll recognize that almost all the "conventional wisdom" about the reasons for affairs fall under just one of these categories, the second one: "Forces within the individual that push them toward affairs."

Unfortunately, most people only look for what fault or shortcoming (of the individual or the marriage) caused the affair—ignoring the other two sets of factors entirely. But like a 3-legged stool, it takes all 3 of these sets of factors to make a "sturdy stool" on which to rest the full reason for an affair.

The value of this broader perspective about the combination of factors is far greater than just getting some intellectual understanding about this situation. It's also critical to dealing with the emotional fallout from a partner's affair. Seeing affairs ONLY in terms of the one category of "failures" makes it much more difficult to overcome.

When you think it's only you and your marriage that failed (and don't realize that you can't fully understand why an affair happens by looking only at your own marriage), you're likely to be filled with blame, shame, and universal feelings of devastation. So properly answering the question, "Why do affairs happen" is tremendously important to personal recovery as well as to the chances for rebuilding the marriage.

"Why" did he have an affair?

Question:

Is it unreasonable to insist on knowing "why" my husband had an affair? He keeps telling me he doesn't know.

Peggy's Response:

This question is somewhat similar to other questions—except this one is specifically asking about getting an answer to the number one question for most people: "Why?"

I completely understand the frustration of trying to understand "why." For many months after learning of my husband's affairs, I asked him over and over, hundreds of times, just why he had affairs. He would try to explain it (after first trying to figure it out himself), but the answers never satisfied me. They simply didn't make any sense. But that's just the point. Having affairs (with all the secrecy and deception) is not a "rational" activity; it's emotion-based without applying clear rational thinking—other than whatever rationalizations are required to have affairs and still feel OK about yourself.

So on the one hand, it's somewhat unreasonable to think there will be a clear, satisfactory answer as to why. On the other hand, it's *very* important that the spouse who had an affair be willing to *try* to respond. Simply caring enough to make the effort makes a big difference. Whereas simply saying, "I don't know" (or trying to avoid saying anything at all) can make things even worse. Most of us can tell whether someone is just trying to avoid dealing with the issue—or whether they genuinely wish they could understand it and explain it, but don't really understand it themselves.

Regardless of what answers a spouse does (or doesn't) come up with, it's important to remember that it's unlikely to be a complete answer. That's because there is no *one* single reason a person has an affair. There are usually many reasons, including forces that pull them toward affairs, forces that push them toward affairs, and the influence of the general factors in society that contribute to affairs.

How could he have an affair if he loved me?

Question:

My husband admitted his affair to me almost immediately after the only time he actually had sex with her, he is devastated as much as I am by what he did. My biggest obstacle to overcome is the question of how he could do this if he truly loved me, I can't imagine doing such a thing under any circumstances!

Peggy's Response:

If only life were as simple as we believe/hope it is. This letter reflects precisely the kind of thinking that many people engaged in at one time or another. I remember when I also thought things were black and white—and felt very sure about some basic beliefs.

Belief: "If he loves me, he won't have an affair. If he has an affair, it must mean he doesn't love me."

Fact: Some people who have affairs no longer love their spouse. Other people who have affairs still love their spouse; they just want an affair in addition to their marriage.

Belief: "Some people can have an affair and others can't. I'm one of those who could never have an affair."

Fact: Anyone is vulnerable to having an affair and no one is immune. All kinds of people have affairs, not just certain types.

Actually nothing about affairs is as clear and clean-cut as we like to believe. But since most people avoid focusing on this issue unless or until it happens to them, they don't get good information about why affairs happen—so they tend to hold the kinds of beliefs described above.

The best way to recover from a partner's affair is to get a lot more information, understanding and perspective about the whole issue of affairs—especially about why affairs happen. There is never one single reason for someone having an affair (like not loving their spouse); it's always a combination of factors.

Is it possible to not know "Why?"

Question:

Is it possible to not have a reason "Why?" the affair happened? My husband insists I had a reason for betraying him for one night. I wasn't looking for it, I wasn't trying to get back at him, but I did let it happen, and I don't have a reason that I consciously know of. Sadly, I wasn't thinking of him or the consequences. He listens to a lot of radio shows that all insist there is a reason "why." I don't have one, and understandably, he doesn't believe me.

Peggy's Response:

The short answer to this question is "Yes," it's possible to not know the reason why an affair happened. Nevertheless, it's *very* important that there be a genuine effort to answer this question. Because it's the willingness to try to answer it that indicates whether someone is taking responsibility for their actions. This kind of effort to think through and talk through all this can make a big difference in the healing process and the chances for rebuilding the relationship.

However, it's understandable that someone might not know precisely why it happened—because there's never one simple reason; it's always a combination of factors. (See my Article posted on the Website: "Why do People Have Affairs?") All too often, whatever "reasons" are given were not actually considered prior to the affair; they're just whatever problems or shortcomings can be identified "after-the-fact" and used to try to explain why it happened.

Actually, the statement in this letter ("I wasn't thinking of him or the consequences") is commonly a big part of the equation. Understandably, this is hard for the spouse to believe, but it's very typical of people who get into affairs (especially women) who "never thought it could happen to me." The tendency to focus only on the excitement or any other seemingly positive aspects of the affair can serve to block out a realistic focus on the problems and consequences.

As for listening to most of the "advice" out there (whether radio shows or any other form)—most people have a very simplistic black-and-white view of everything related to affairs. However, this is a very complex issue with no easy answers. So while it's extremely important to try to understand as much as possible about affairs in general and your situation in particular, it's very difficult to ever "make sense" of something that is simply not "sensible."

Can you "cause" an affair?

Question:

Do you believe that there is any truth in feeling or thinking that our partners can be driven to have extramarital affairs by our being abusive or not reinforcing their feelings?

Peggy's Response:

While "being abusive or not reinforcing their feelings" can certainly lead to legitimate dissatisfaction with the marriage, it can't "drive someone to have an extramarital affair." Having an affair is only one of many ways of reacting to this kind of situation. Other alternatives include: insisting on being treated differently, insisting on counseling, or leaving the marriage.

Of course, this kind of situation may lead someone to think of having an affair or want to have an affair. But we don't do everything we want to do. Regardless of why someone might want to have an affair, they're unlikely to actually do it unless they're willing to be dishonest and deceptive. So the real reason they have an affair is because of this willingness to deceive. Since most people can't handle a sexually open marriage, unless they're willing to be dishonest and deceptive, they're likely to choose to be monogamous.

The bigger issue underlying this question, however, is the tendency for someone who is having an affair to blame their spouse for it by saying "you didn't meet my needs." Frankly this whole idea that affairs are due to a failure of your partner to meet your needs simply adds insult to injury.

So while "being abusive" is a serious problem and definitely calls for taking some kind of decisive action, having an affair is not a reasonable action to choose.

Is a change in roles part of the solution?

Question:

I am a professional turned homemaker, and I had serious self-image issues before the affairs. Is a change in roles (my going back to work) part of the solution?

Peggy's Response:

Unfortunately, our self-image and self-esteem may be connected in our own minds (or in the minds of our spouse or others) as being related to our "roles." However, we need to overcome this way of thinking because it is an extremely limiting way of defining ourselves. One of the ways I remind myself to avoid thinking that way is related to a quote I read several years ago: "A role is only a task; we've been using it as an identity."

So any "solution" to problems in our lives does not ultimately lie with whether or not we change our role; it lies with how clearly we can view ourselves as individuals *not* defined by our roles.

This is even more important when it comes to focusing on the issue of affairs, per se. All too often, when our spouse has an affair, we tend to think it is directly related to whatever role we have been playing—when that is not the case at all. It's easy, after-the-fact, to look back at our role prior to the affair and make some kind of connection—but it's a false connection.

The following excerpt from "The Monogamy Myth" is an example of what I mean:

For instance, a woman who was a full-time homemaker and mother was convinced that if only she'd been out in the world, she would have been a more interesting partner and her husband wouldn't have had an affair. At the same time, another woman who was career-oriented was convinced that her involvement with her career limited her time and attention to her husband and was the reason he had an affair. Accepting personal responsibility for determining the behavior of another person inevitably leads to failure."

The bottom line is that most of us tend to focus on whatever we don't have or don't do—rather than focusing on the positives about ourselves and our roles in life. We can improve our self-image (and thereby our self-esteem) by recognizing that it's society's recognition of certain roles as somehow better than others that needs to change. We're fine just the way we are.

He never gave it any thought!?

Question:

My husband has had numerous affairs. When I asked how he justified his actions, he said he never gave it any thought. Is it possible to do this for years, know it is wrong and not be able to justify ones behavior?

Peggy's Response:

First, a disclaimer:

My comments about the way men think (or don't think) about their actions does not apply to all men having affairs. However, it is quite common among men having affairs to think this way. And it's much more common among men than among women. (Women usually do "think," although that doesn't mean their thinking or the guilt feelings stimulated by the thinking actually change the behavior. Women tend to "justify" their affairs on the basis of being unhappy/dissatisfied with their husbands whereas men are more likely to see the affairs as having very little to do with their wives.)

As difficult as it may be to believe, many men really don't think about the impact of their affairs. While they would "know it is wrong" if they actually focused on what they were doing, they manage to simply block out any thought of possible ramifications or consequences. There's a general assumption (rationalization) that their wife "will never know and therefore no one will get hurt." Since assumptions by their very nature are just "accepted" without really "thinking about them," this assumption means they never really think about their actions.

This may be a little easier to comprehend if you think in terms of the way most of us want to feel good about ourselves. When many men have affairs, they don't consciously think about what they're doing because it might produce guilt feelings that would interfere with the pleasure of the affair. So they focus only on the pleasure—and simply avoid focusing on any possible pain. Since they never really focus on their behavior, they feel no need to "justify their behavior"—even to themselves.

Another way to understand this way of thinking is to realize that many men don't think about how their affairs may affect their home life—because they see "one as having nothing to do with the other." There's a certain "compartmentalization" that takes place in many areas of life for men, and this is one of them.

Here's a description of this process excerpted from *Beyond Affairs*:

Men have been conditioned to be success-oriented. Many men get carried away with...the importance of their careers. This commitment to career...tends to create the kind of separation from family that leads to a husband and wife moving further apart. It's not the amount of time or energy spent on the job that determines this separateness, but the degree to which work life is not seen as relevant to home life—when they are kept in two neatly divided areas. When this happens, it's only a small step to separating other things as having nothing to do with home life. Sports and hobbies are usually included in this 'separate world.' Once this pattern is well developed in a number of areas, affairs are more likely to occur. It's a simple matter to keep affairs separate if other aspects of life are already seen as separate and having nothing to do with the family.

Here are some of my own personal reactions to dealing with this compartmentalization, excerpted from *The Monogamy Myth*.

When my husband tried to tell me it had 'nothing to do with me,' I said it had everything to do with me. When he said for me 'not to take it personally,' I said that was the only way I could take it. As I got more information about other marriages in which affairs had taken place, I finally came to see that his having affairs didn't depend on what I did or didn't do. Anyone is vulnerable to their partner having an affair, regardless of how good a mate they may be. To finally accept that the affair was not their fault is one of the biggest steps for a person who has had their self-esteem shattered by their partner's affair. They are able to feel much better about themselves when they stop seeing the problem as totally due to their "failures."

As this last excerpt shows, since women's affairs are often a reflection of their feelings about their husbands, women assume a husband's affairs must reflect his feelings about them—and his willingness to hurt them. But the bottom line for most men having affairs is that they don't think about the wife much at all, and if they do, they (naively) assume that no one will find out and no one will get hurt. As those of us (both men and women) who have been hurt by a spouse's affair know...we usually do suspect and/or find out and it does hurt—a lot!

Why does he look at other women, then lies about it?

Question:

My husband and I have been married for 26 years with two grown children. For many years he has looked at other women. I let it go but now it is always. I know he is 50. I am 46, still attractive. But we can't even go to the grocery store without him doing double takes and lying to me about it when I catch him. Why??

Peggy's Response:

While this behavior is irritating and insensitive, a more serious issue is the "lying" about it. (Obviously, you can't begin to address a problem unless/until it's acknowledged.) However, it's important to understand how/why men lie about this and what can be done about it—together.

While a wife has no responsibility for the behavior itself, she does need to recognize the contribution she may have unwittingly made to the lying about it. What normally happens is that when we first develop a serious love relationship (and begin to feel possessive and/or jealous), we don't like it when our man finds other women attractive and/or is attracted to other women.

However, even though it may be something we don't want to think about, it's normal to feel attractions to other people—no matter how much we love our spouse. So if you try to deny the possibility of your partner ever being attracted to another woman, you send a subtle (or not so subtle) signal that you don't want to know about any of their feelings of attraction toward others. And since attractions are both normal and inevitable, you're in essence sending a message that says, "Lie to me; pretend you're never attracted to anyone else."

After years of "pretending" you're not looking at other women, it can be pretty difficult to finally admit it—even when it becomes extremely obvious. So in order to make it possible to deal with the actual ogling behavior, it's necessary to begin by breaking through the denial. A man may be more willing to acknowledge the denial (lying) if you acknowledge that you contributed (albeit unintentionally) to his feeling he needs to lie about it.

While it may seem "unfair" to assume any responsibility for the lying, you're not doing this in order to be "nice"—but to be "smart." It's just that you have a much better chance of getting him to acknowledge and deal with the behavior if you first make it possible for him to admit that the behavior is taking place.

Frankly, simply talking honestly about the behavior is likely to diminish it. That's because attractions become a much greater threat to the relationship whenever acknowledging them is taboo. By making it taboo to talk about, you're granting power to the attractions that they would not otherwise possess. If you can't talk about these feelings, they become your own private secret and are likely to grow in intensity and desire.

Once you recognize that attractions are not a direct threat to your relationship, you can focus on the real danger—which is acting on them. And the best way to decrease the likelihood of acting on any attractions is for a couple to honestly discuss this issue and their feelings about it on an ongoing basis.

This process of acknowledging attractions and discussing how they are to be handled is one that both married and unmarried couples need to address prior to any problem with affairs. Constantly wondering and worrying about this issue creates a strain between partners that may prevent their developing a sense of trust in each other. They need to talk through their feelings about monogamy and attractions to other people on an ongoing basis as their relationship develops.

A Personal Note:

I vividly recall the issues James and I had earlier in our marriage. (Concerns about others works both ways, of course.) When we were young, he was even concerned about my dancing with other guys. He gradually became less concerned about me about the same time I became more concerned about him. When I suspected he was having affairs, my antenna were up all the time, and I imagined every woman as a potential threat.

After dealing with his affairs and committing to a different level of honesty, we never again had the problem of being concerned about who either of us might be looking at or attracted to—because we talk about it. Most people think it's too scary to talk about attractions, but the real risk is in not talking about them, leaving them to grow as a fantasy without focusing on any possible consequences.

Finally, the above question related specifically to "looking at other women," not necessarily "attractions." And this is even easier to deal with. For many years, James and I have actually pointed out to each other when we notice someone we think is extremely attractive—of either sex. This way, looking at others is a shared activity, not something that comes between us. (Of course, it's important that it not be "ogling" as described in the question; rather it needs to be "subtle," just "sneaking a peak" and sharing the reactions with each other.

For articles already posted on the website that cover some of the above information, as well as some additional comments about "dealing with attractions," see these two articles under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website: "Preventing Affairs" and "How can affairs be prevented."

How can he love me and have an affair?

Question:

I've read the reasons why people have affairs but still feel like he wouldn't have done it if he really loved me. Kissing, touching and sex are all things that you do with someone you care about, right? So how can he have loved me?

Peggy's Response:

As with many of the questions I receive, I have addressed this one before—several years ago. But the belief/hope persists that "If he loves me, he won't have an affair—and if he has an affair, it must mean he doesn't love me."

This letter reflects precisely the kind of thinking that many people engage in at one time or another. I remember when I also thought things were black and white—and felt very sure about some basic beliefs. If only life were as simple as this.

It's true that some people who have affairs no longer love their spouse. But many others who have affairs *do* still love their spouse; they just get drawn into the excitement that comes from having an affair.

This is not gender specific and can happen on both sides, but it's more prevalent among men having affairs. Men who have affairs often do not consider themselves in "unhappy" marriages, while some married women who have an affair may point to unhappiness in the marriage as the "reason/excuse."

Actually, there are *many* reasons why people have affairs—and unhappiness with the marriage is only one aspect of one of the *three* primary "sets of factors"—including factors that "push" people into affairs, factors that "pull" people into affairs, and "societal factors."

I have also dealt with this particular issue firsthand. At one point James expressed the kind of sentiment that many men feel, saying: "I wanted it all—a good thing with Peggy and affairs too."

Here are some excerpts from two of our books: *Beyond Affairs* and *The Monogamy Myth*:

We'd been married almost twelve years... when James said, "I can't think of anything more I want out of life except more time to enjoy it." I took this to mean he was very satisfied with his life—and with me. It never occurred to me the reason for his satisfaction was that he thought he had the best of both worlds—a wife at home and lovers too. I'd thought only in terms of me or someone else. I'd assumed that involvement with another woman meant he didn't love me.

I was doing any and everything I could possibly think of to be such an ideal wife that he wouldn't consider having an affair. Later, when James reflected on his reaction to my efforts during that time, he recalled thinking, 'Wow, this is great; I've got this terrific wife who's doing all these wonderful things—and I've got my affairs too!' He felt like the luckiest man in the world.

(end of excerpts)

To specifically respond to the writer of the above question... while I know how crazy it sounds to say that your husband can love you and still have an affair, it's important to understand that this is the way many men feel. They compartmentalize the two (as if one had nothing to do with the other). Then they deny the possibility of the risk they're taking by blocking out any focus on possible consequences. They simply assume that "she'll never find out and no one will ever be hurt." Foolish thinking, but extremely common.

So while this understanding doesn't heal the pain, it's a good start at beginning to shift the focus from "why did it happen" to "what are we going to do to deal with it now?" The first step to beginning to recover is to come to grips with the reality that this has happened and that you need to get as much information and perspective about affairs as possible in order to effectively deal with it. That includes recognizing that (as crazy as it seems) it's possible for a man to love his wife and still have an affair.

How could he still love me?

Question:

I have heard over and over from persons who have had affairs about how "they didn't think about how it would hurt their spouse." My husband claims this about his affair, along with "I never stopped loving you." How can that be? I understand attraction, but I DO NOT understand how you can "give in" and love your spouse (at the same time). I told my husband, the affair was bad enough, but the fact that he "wanted" to stray is what hurts most. He clearly didn't "choose" his love for me at the time.

Peggy's Response:

The above letter contains several different (albeit related) questions:

- How could they not think about how the affair would hurt their spouse?
- How could they "give in" to an affair but "never stop loving you"?
- And an implied assumption...that they "wanted" to stray and "chose" to do so.

So I'll address each of these issues:

How could they not think about how the affair would hurt their spouse?

As difficult as it may be to comprehend, in most cases the person having an affair just ignores all the risks and "assumes" nothing will ever go wrong. The main reason they don't actually "think" about the potential hurt to their spouse is that affairs can be extremely exciting, a heady experience that exists outside of the normal distractions of life's problems. And this excitement simply blocks out the focus on the risks that are involved.

Also, it's almost essential to block out the risk of hurt to the spouse in order to proceed with the affair and to enjoy it. Focusing on the potential consequences would inject a degree of "reality" into a situation that is primarily a "fantasy" world. None of this understanding justifies or in any way defends the behavior, but it does help to realize that even though it seems impossible to block out focusing on the potential pain to the spouse, that is, in fact, what usually happens.

How can they "give in" to an affair but "never stop loving their spouse?"

I was like most women in that I had a basic assumption that went something like this:

If my husband loves me, he wouldn't have an affair. And if he has an affair, it means he doesn't love me." One of the reasons we tend to feel this way is that most women who have affairs have pretty much convinced themselves that they no longer love their husbands, so we project our way of thinking onto men. However, in the mind of many (most) men having affairs, "it has nothing to do with my feelings for my wife.

We'd been married almost twelve years... when James said, "I can't think of anything more I want out of life except more time to enjoy it." I took this to mean he was very satisfied with his life—and with me. It never occurred to me the reason for his satisfaction was that he thought he had the best of both worlds—a wife at home and lovers too. I'd thought only in terms of me or someone else. I'd assumed that involvement with another woman meant he didn't love me.

When we were working through the issues surrounding his affairs, this was one of the biggest issues we faced. He kept saying, "It had nothing to do with you." And, of course, I kept saying, "It had everything to do with me." In fact, as James tried to explain his thinking to me, he said he just felt like the luckiest man in the world—to have a terrific wife and his affairs too! This is the kind of sentiment that many men feel. They "want it all—a good thing with their wife—and

affairs too." Anyway, I *finally* came to accept that *for him* it really didn't have anything to do with his love for me. He "loved" me, but he also enjoyed his affairs.

So the idea that a man won't have an affair unless he's unhappy with his wife is one that many people hold—but that is simply not the case. Many men want *both*—the satisfactions that come from a wife and family *and* the excitement that comes from having an affair.

There are *many* reasons why people have affairs—and unhappiness with the marriage is only one aspect of one of the 3 primary *sets* of factors (including factors that "push" people into affairs, factors that "pull" people into affairs, and "societal factors"). For more on the reasons for affairs, see the Article on the website titled: "Why do people have affairs?"

The assumption that they "wanted" to stray and "chose" to do so.

This way of thinking assumes that the person having affairs is actually making a "choice." But a choice implies a deliberately considered decision (based on rational thinking)—whereas affairs are almost purely "emotion-based," acting on instinct, desire, excitement, etc., without actively engaging the rational-thinking/decision-making part of the brain.

For instance, if I thought that James consciously considered the devastating impact on me of discovering his affairs, decided he didn't care, and "chose" to have an affair anyway...it would be very difficult to ever recover and/or rebuild the marriage. But once you understand the denial and rationalization that goes into having affairs, you realize that consciously "choosing" is just not the way it works.

What is the role of family of origin in affairs?

Question:

Is there any correlation of infidelity with your origin family?? Do you inherit, learn ...infidelity from your origin family?? Is there any connection??

Peggy's Response:

The premise of a correlation between family-of-origin factors with having an affair yourself fails to recognize that affairs are so prevalent that if you could know the truth about all family members, you could always find where affairs had taken place somewhere in your family. The bottom line is that affairs happen to all kinds of people from all kinds of family backgrounds, making this premise far too simplistic an explanation.

While family of origin - and almost any proposed factor that might contribute to affairs - may contain some relevance (especially in certain extreme circumstances in the immediate family), it is in no way a primary aspect. There are *many* factors that go into increasing the vulnerability for having an affair. In fact, "anyone is vulnerable, no one is immune"—and to think otherwise is to make yourself even *more* vulnerable, because you fail to be on guard against it.

Unfortunately, since many professionals expound *one* particular cause, a person can find a therapist who supports the idea of family of origin as a critical component. But just as therapists with therapeutic training in traditional "analysis" see family history as the primary explanation for affairs, therapists with training in traditional "marital therapy" see problems in the marriage as the primary reason for affairs. (Most therapists bring their primary mode of therapy to whatever issue they face and try to force-fit it to affairs.)

Understandably, most people feel a need to understand "why" an affair happens and hope to find one definitive reason. But the more you learn about affairs, the more you appreciate that it's never as simple as you might wish. For more detail on the various factors that contribute to affairs, see the Article posted on my website titled "Who had Affairs – and Why?"

The best way to get a comprehensive understanding of the whole issue is to learn as much as possible about the whole subject of affairs—and reading lots of good books by respected "experts on affairs" can help.

Naturally, I think my own books provide solid information, but I also recommend a number of books on affairs—and have written reviews of many of them, posted here on the website. (I frequently recommend books which contain some aspects with which I disagree, but which also contain a useful material.)

Do affairs happen in a "good marriage?"

Question:

Have you ever run across a really good couple where an affair has happened? Essentially, we were and we are each other's best friend. Sex is very good. Intimacy is good. We have fun together . . . always have. Obviously, there were infatuation elements like newness, conquest, the totality of the experience, etc., (the "pull" factors you describe) that don't continue with us. But have you had experience with an affair in a really good marriage. Or, sort of by definition, does the affair prove the marriage less?

Peggy's Response:

Yes, affairs happen to "good people in good marriages." Affairs are extremely prevalent and happen to all kinds of people in all walks of life. *No one* is immune. An affair is not just a personal reflection on you or your particular marriage. So the affair does not by definition prove the marriage less. It's just that ironically, in "good marriages," people assume they're safe from an affair so may not actively work to try to prevent it from happening, thereby being more vulnerable.

In fact, just assuming monogamy is part of what I've described as the set of beliefs (that I've called "the monogamy myth") that actually undermine people's intentions to be monogamous.

Here's my quick overview of this set of beliefs from my book, "The Monogamy Myth:"

The Monogamy Myth is made up of the following set of beliefs:

- Monogamy is the norm in our society and society as a whole supports monogamy.*
- You can assume monogamy when you get married, so there's no need to discuss it.*
- Most people are monogamous, so an affair indicates a personal failure of your particular marriage.*

The reality is quite different:

- Monogamy is NOT the norm. Society gives lip service to monogamy, but actually supports affairs.*
- No marriage is immune from affairs. It requires ongoing honest communication to prevent them.*
- No couple can fully understand why an affair happens by looking only at their own marriage."*

Unfortunately, many people (including many counselors) think an affair is always a reflection of "problems in the marriage." But since *all* marriages have problems from time to time, it's easy to point a finger 'after-the-fact' to whatever identifiable problem existed in the relationship—and say *that's* why the affair happened. However, if that particular problem hadn't existed, there would have been some other problem, and *that* one would have been identified as *the* reason.

As the writer recognizes (by commenting on the "pull" factors that contribute to affairs), an affair is almost always a "combination" of many different factors, and the "pull" factors are far more powerful than most people realize or appreciate.

So while the general "state of being married" (with the familiarity, the roles we play, the practical, day-to-day responsibilities, etc.) may have the general effect of allowing people to be more vulnerable to getting caught up in the fantasy of a new relationship, the state of a "particular" marriage is *not* the cause of an affair.

Re: affairs in really good marriages...

This is far more common than you would think. In fact, a *lot* of the time I hear people say, "I thought I had the best marriage of anyone I knew." (In fact, my own husband said this, even as he had affairs 30 years ago).

So it's important to recognize that "good marriages" are not immune to affairs. And I hope the writer of this question and all the others in a similar situation will be able to continue to appreciate their "good marriage" and to enjoy it for many years to come.

Here's another excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*—about preventing affairs.

What will NOT prevent affairs:

- being "in love"*
- promising to be faithful*
- threats or ultimatums*
- religious commandments or parental injunctions*
- having more children*
- getting caught*
- repeating the marriage vows*
- spicing up your sex life*
- trying to be "perfect"*
- trying to meet all your partner's needs*

What is most likely to prevent affairs:

- being aware that no one is immune from having an affair*
- discussing and agreeing on a commitment to monogamy*
- regularly renewing your commitment*
- engaging in ongoing, honest communication about everything that impacts your relationship*
- acknowledging that the issue of monogamy is never settled once and for all"*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

What about affairs due to a "mid-life crisis?"

Question #1:

I have a question about "mid-life crisis." While I know infidelity can happen at any time and at any age, I couldn't help but notice the prevalence of it in people in their 40's. Any comment?

Question #2:

After 28 years of marriage, my wife had an affair with someone much younger. Does this indicate a mid-life crisis? Or could it be due to physical changes (menopause)? It's very confusing.

Peggy's Response:

These questions focus on affairs in the "middle of life," specifically wondering about:

- the prevalence of affairs among people in their 40's.
- whether it's due to a "mid-life crisis."
- whether physical changes (menopause in women) play a role.

Re: the prevalence of affairs among this age group...

I see a wide range of ages for affairs - between being married 2 years and married 42 years when it takes place. The age most prevalent for those having affairs seems to be in the 30's rather than the 40's. However, as the range demonstrates, NO age is excluded.

As for hearing of more affairs among people in their 40's, we simply hear of more affairs at all ages than in the past—as stories of affairs are more widely exposed and discussed than once was the case. Also, I suspect that whatever age you happen to be, when it happens to you, you are then more likely to notice stories of other affairs among your particular age group. So those in their 40's would understandably take note of hearing of other affairs among their group.

Re: "mid-life crisis" as a cause of affairs...

It's likely that affairs at this age are somewhat influenced by concerns about aging or losing your sex appeal. But that would not be THE reason it happened. There's never just ONE reason; it's always a combination of many different factors. And, certainly, even if it is one of the contributing factors, it's not an excuse. It's not as if "the devil (mid-life crisis) made me do it."

Re: the role of physical changes in mid-life affairs...

Both men and women undergo physical changes in mid-life that may affect their feelings about themselves as a "sexual being." For instance, menopause may play a role for women in reducing desire for sex, although arousal is still possible, (and arousal might seem easier with a new partner). And for men, concern about losing their potency or sexual functioning may play a role in their thinking that a new partner will help them address that concern. But, again, having an affair cannot legitimately be attributed to these physical changes.

Finally, another way of addressing the "mid-life crisis" issue:

While I am well past "mid-life" (turning 70 just 4 months from now), I recognize that throughout my life, including the present, it's been important to incorporate some "newness" in my life in order to continue to feel fully alive and involved in life. Unfortunately, when people feel this itch for something new, they may turn to a new person by having an affair. But that's a very poor choice when there are so many other choices that could bring newness without the pain and devastation caused by affairs.

Affairs are not the result of clear, rational choices; they're impulsive actions taken without fully considering everything involved. So if anyone facing "mid-life" feels the need for something new and exciting, "having an affair" is about the worst way to go about achieving their goals. It's smart to take a good look at your life overall (past, present and future) and consciously determine what steps you could take that would improve and enrich your life.

As I've mentioned in other writings on this website, for 35 years James and I have helped people do "life-planning." We have conducted hundreds of workshops for people from all walks of life, but now only provide a workbook for people to do this on their own. And the subtitle of the LifeDesign Workbook provides the key to maintaining a degree of satisfaction (and control) over your life: "Living your life by choice instead of chance."

For more information about "life-planning," you can visit our other website:
www.boundlessdreaming.org

What ever happened to moral integrity?

Question:

If people commit to be married to a particular person, why can't they commit to be faithful to them? Don't women or men think about the pain and suffering they cause their spouse before they decide to have an affair? Doesn't the third person think of how the married person must feel? What ever happened to moral integrity? I believe in honest communication and monogamous relationships, not reasons to justify infidelity.

Peggy's Response:

These questions represent the way most people think things "should" be. Every survey ever done shows that approximately 85% of all people polled think affairs are wrong—but this doesn't keep large numbers of people from having affairs. Unfortunately, we don't "practice what we preach." And, contrary to common thinking, it's not a question of "bad" people having affairs and "good" people avoiding them. All kinds of people from all walks of life are vulnerable to having affairs.

As for whether they "think about the pain and suffering they cause their spouse?"—No, they don't think about consequences; they try to focus on the positive feelings they get from the affair. Inherent in having an affair is blocking out any focus on the potential consequences. In order to rationalize their behavior, there's an unrealistic belief that "what they don't know won't hurt them," or "they'll never find out," etc.

The same is usually true of the third party. Anyone involved in an affair, regardless of which role they play, usually focuses only on the positive things they are experiencing while ignoring, denying, or rationalizing about any negatives. And as for how people can "decide to have an affair," most people don't sit down and "decide;" they usually report that it "just happened." Having an affair is not a rational, thoughtful "decision."

Finally, the comment about "believing in honest communication and monogamy" goes to the heart of one of the basic problems with affairs. While as a society we profess monogamy, we don't practice it—precisely because we are willing to be dishonest and deceptive. If people were truly committed to honesty, most would *choose* monogamy—because few people can handle a sexually open marriage.

Unfortunately, what happens most often is that people *profess* monogamy but *practice* "secret, deceptive" extramarital affairs. And saying it "should" be different probably won't change this. But more open, responsible discussion of the realistic impact of affairs just may be able to make a difference.

Is "infidelity" natural?

Question:

Is INFIDELITY a NATURAL behavior?

Peggy's Response:

Usually, when someone wants to debate the issue of whether or not it's *natural* for human beings to be monogamous, it's because they're trying to prove/justify some particular behavior. Frankly, this kind of argument—whether human beings are innately monogamous or innately not monogamous—is irrelevant. The reason it's irrelevant is because human beings adapt/choose all kinds of behavior, regardless of whether or not it's innate.

Most people who have multiple sex partners are quite secretive, dishonest, and deceptive about it. So most people who have multiple sex partners are not doing it because it's somehow "innate" behavior. (It would be innate *only* if it took place regardless of whether it was done honestly or deceptively.) They're doing it because they think they can do it without getting caught. If they were completely honest (therefore losing the "protection" that comes from deception), they would be unlikely to act on a desire for additional sex partners.

So it really doesn't matter whether or not it's innate behavior; it only matters whether the behavior is engaged in with deception or with honesty. When people are willing to be deceptive about their sexual behavior, they're more likely to have multiple partners. But (since most people can't handle a sexually open marriage) if they act with honesty, fairness and equality, they're likely to *choose* to be monogamous—regardless of whether or not it's innate.

Finally, I can't leave this discussion without commenting on the use of the word "infidelity." Anyone who has read much of my work knows that I *never* use the word "infidelity." (I use it in this instance only in precisely quoting the question that was submitted.) But I have written a good bit about the drawbacks to using "loaded" words like infidelity, adultery, cheating—or any word that increases the emotional reaction and diminishes the ability to *think* more clearly and rationally about this whole issue.

How much does alcohol contribute to a one-night stand?

Question:

My husband had a "one night stand." He was out of town and told me what he had done within 24 hours of returning. I am grateful for the honesty but I am still devastated. He says it happened because of being extremely intoxicated, having opportunity, and the fact that he had been rejected sexually by me so often in the last four years. Although it is no excuse, how much do you think alcohol contributes to something like a one night stand?

Peggy's Response:

I am not an expert on alcoholism, but it's my understanding that alcohol doesn't "cause" someone to do something they wouldn't otherwise do. However, it may "allow" them to do it by lowering their inhibitions, leading to an "openness" to things that might otherwise be more tightly controlled. Also, of course, alcohol affects different people in different ways—so the degree to which alcohol might contribute to something like this may vary by individual.

The more significant piece of information in the above letter, however, is the fact that the husband immediately told about the incident. This is not to say that simply "confessing" after-the-fact can make things OK. It clearly *doesn't* (as illustrated by the comment of being "grateful for the honesty but...still devastated"). It's just that this kind of immediate "telling" avoids the additional serious problems created by ongoing secrecy and deception.

Also, it was insightful of the husband in the above letter to recognize that there was probably no one single reason why he did it. I've often written about affairs being caused by a "combination" of factors: those that "push" people into affairs, those that "pull" people into affairs, and societal factors. The "reasons" listed above clearly illustrate this combination: factors that "push" (being sexually rejected), factors that "pull" (being intoxicated), and societal factors (having opportunity).

In the final analysis, while alcohol may "contribute" to a one-night stand, it's probably impossible to determine the precise degree to which it contributed. The fact that someone immediately acknowledges (and regrets) their behavior while intoxicated may indicate that (at least in their mind) it played a large part. If so, that's all the more reason to avoid alcohol in the future. For instance, even though my own husband did not "blame" alcohol for his affairs, he stopped drinking when he told me about his affairs—because he recognized that drinking and having affairs were part of a general *pattern* of behavior that he wanted to change.

Are affairs more sexually charged than marriage?

Question:

My husband says he never could generate the kind of passion with me that he currently has with his partner...he says he has realized how "good" he is in bed with someone else...Are affairs typically more sexually charged than marriage?

Peggy's Response:

It's not that affairs per se are more sexually charged than marriage; it's that any new sexual relationship is likely to be more sexually charged than one that has existed for many years. But the passion in a new relationship has almost nothing to do with the particular people involved; it's simply that anyone playing the role of "new sexual partner" is likely to seem more exciting than a sexual partner who is not "new." And by the same token, anyone who finds themselves playing the role of new sexual partner is likely to feel more sexual themselves.

It's easy to test this for yourself by thinking back to the very beginning of any relationship that becomes sexual. While dating and/or newly married, there's usually a lot of sexual energy and passion. It's natural for this to diminish somewhat once the newness wears off—and once the relationship takes on the practical responsibilities involved in developing and sustaining a long-term relationship. No matter how sexually exciting an affair may be, if that affair relationship were to become a long-term committed relationship, it would go through the same normal transformation into being much less sexually charged.

It's rather sad that people who never get beyond seeking and valuing a new relationship for its short-term sexual passion may spend their lives going from one partner to another, never getting past this fairly adolescent "first stage" of love and connection. They never see that the initial sexual passion is no match for the deeper, stronger love that's based on being "connected" by something stronger than just sexual energy.

What leads people to have an affair?

Question:

I don't recall in your book you revealing the reasons that your husband had the affairs. I understand the societal issues that you talk about and the myths of monogamy, but there seems to be a portion of the affair that is about the individual and what they are using the affair for. Whether it be insecurity, power, masking of pain that they haven't faced, fear of failure.

Peggy's Response:

The "reason" for the affairs in my own case is just like the reason in all cases—it's a combination of factors. It's never one single reason.

Most people assume that all the factors that lead to affairs have to do with some weakness, shortcoming, lack, fault, etc., of the person having the affair and/or the spouse or the marriage. For instance, all the reasons listed in this question: "insecurity, power, masking of pain, fear of failure" relate to shortcomings of some kind.

However, they all fit under just one set of factors—that I have referred to as those that push people into affairs. In addition to this one set of factors are two other sets of factors: the second set are those that pull people into affairs, like the sheer excitement, curiosity, novelty, fun of having an affair.

Then the third set of factors include those I refer to as "societal factors" (our fascination with affairs, the glorification of affairs in the media through movies, soap operas, romance novels, etc., our lack of honesty about sex at all stages of our lives, and the general secrecy that protects people who are having affairs). I've written about this extensively in my book, "The Monogamy Myth."

The bottom line is that no one can understand why an affair happened in their marriage by looking only at their own marriage. They need to understand the complex combination of factors from all three different types of forces.

So, like all marriages, the "reason for the affairs" in my own situation was a combination of things from all three different kinds of factors: some factors that "pushed," some that "pulled," and the societal factors.

While most people would like to identify one single "reason" for an affair, it's just not that simple. The more you understand about affairs, the more you see that the "trump" factor that determines when someone actually has an affair is a willingness to be dishonest and deceptive. Without this willingness, it wouldn't matter what other factors existed. So if you absolutely have to determine *one* "reason" for affairs, that's it.

True Love!?!???

Question:

What if two people find true love? Falling in love is one of the reasons people have affairs. What if a person has experienced enough in life to know true love? love?

Peggy's Response:

I must admit that this whole question of "true love" is problematic on the face of it. In fact, the only term that does more harm to relationships than "true love" is "soul-mate." Both make it sound like love is some magical, mystical thing, removed from everyday reality. But a better definition of real "true love" is Love that Lasts. (This is such a critical understanding that I have posted this particular question as an article on the website under the section of articles about "Marriage and Family").

The fact is that neither true love nor a soul-mate are things (or people) that you "find." True intimacy (that leads to true love) cannot be reached quickly. It's easy to kid yourself that you have a degree of "intimacy" with someone you just meet—particularly if you get involved in sex right away. But this initial feeling of intimacy doesn't last. It ends, to be replaced by a much deeper (and more real) intimacy over time—only if you are able to understand the difference between that first superficial sensation and the "real thing."

Shared experiences over time, along with getting to know each other on a deeper, more trusting basis, is required to even approach anything like becoming "soul-mates." Frankly, while there's no such thing as finding your soul-mate, it's also quite rare for a couple to truly become soul-mates. That's because it takes time, commitment, experience—and honesty. (For more on this important factor, see the article posted on the website in the Articles about Affairs section titled: "Honesty!")

So forget the idea of "finding true love" (as referred to in this week's question). And it's not true that "falling in love is one of the reasons people have affairs." They have affairs because they fall into lust or into the first stage of "romantic love"—which is not the same thing as true love. So if you want to experience "true love," settle down and invest the time and energy necessary to develop it with the one you hope will eventually become your soul-mate.

Why did she have an affair?

Question:

Is it possible for a spouse who strayed to never fully understand why she had the affair? Our therapy sessions have found some "holes" in what was otherwise a good marriage. But I see her decision to stray as a separate issue, and I don't know why she can't understand her own mindset as to why she chose to step outside our marriage. This impasse is making it difficult for me to get past the affair and forgive her.

Peggy's Response:

On the surface, this would seem to be one of the simplest questions: "Why did you have an affair?" However, it's not simple at all; in fact, it's very complex. Mainly, that's because there is never just one specific reason someone has an affair, it's always a combination of many factors.

I personally understand how frustrating it is when a spouse seems unable to answer this question. I must have asked my husband a thousand times "Why" ... and of course, one reason I kept asking is that *no* answer is "acceptable" - in that nothing makes sense. This is one of the many difficult aspects of dealing with affairs: we're trying to make sense of something that isn't sensible (rational); it's purely based on emotions.

As hard as it may be to believe, the person who has an affair seldom feels they "chose" to do so. More often than not, it felt more like a willingness to go along with the emotions of the moment rather than a choice. And they often really don't understand their own mindset. Of course, even though they may not succeed, it's important that they be willing to try to figure out and to verbalize whatever insights they may have into their thoughts at the time they embarked on an affair.

One very important insight by the writer of the above letter is:

"I see her decision to stray as a separate issue." [i.e., as an issue other than whatever "holes" existed in the marriage]

Since *all* marriages have problems, it's always possible (after-the-fact) to identify the problems—and then assign a cause-and-effect. But this is a very narrow, simplistic assessment of a much more complicated issue. Whatever problems exist in the marriage are only one small part of one of the 3 different *sets* of factors that lead to affairs. (For details about the 3 sets of factors, see the Article on my website titled: "Who has Affairs – and Why?")

Unfortunately, all too often we get the erroneous message (from books, articles, even therapists) that "affairs are caused by problems with the marriage." In fact, one of the problems with much of the therapy in dealing with affairs (especially among therapists doing traditional "marital therapy" that focuses primarily on the problems in the marriage) is that they inadvertently reinforce the false assumption that the affair was caused by the marital problems.

Below is an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*:

The Advice of Experts

Since many people look to the opinion of experts as validation of the correctness of their opinions, the professional posture regarding the reasons for affairs has a powerful impact on others in society. Not only has the personal view of affairs been the assumption of the general population, but most experts agree. In fact, the standard advice of counselors, therapists, and advice columnists has been for couples to examine themselves and the conditions within their relationship to determine why an affair happened.

Since most people in the helping professions have their training or orientation in terms of psychology rather than sociology, they tend to see things in terms of personal, individual problems. They bring this bias to their work with couples dealing with affairs, and this personal orientation reinforces the attitude that affairs are due exclusively to individual weaknesses. This approach is considered to be the appropriate one when couples are in counseling, as illustrated by the following description of the role of a counselor. "A good marriage counselor will help a couple talk about the reasons for cheating in terms of the marriage and about the problems that lead a partner to seek an extramarital relationship. In counseling, the couple discuss what they feel the marriage lacks or where the rough spots are, and then with the counselor's help they work to correct their problems."

Almost any book, magazine, or newspaper advice column dealing with this issue reinforces this view of affairs as caused only by problems in the relationship. Following are some typical examples: "Cheating always points to a weakness in your relationship." "Ask yourself why you need to go outside the marriage, what is lacking in your relationship." "Affairs are then attempts to meet important needs that are unmet within the context of the marriage."

The tendency of the experts to focus almost exclusively on personal failure and inadequacies strongly reinforces the personal view of affairs. And this interpretation contributes to the difficulty of being able to fully recover from the emotional impact of this experience. Despite the fact that 85 percent of the members of BAN had sought some kind of counseling, many expressed disappointment with the help they had received. Most of them continued to struggle with unresolved feelings for many years following their experience.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

So while I recognize that problems in the marriage are a *part* of the explanation for why affairs happen, I see the reasons for affairs as being far more complex than this. Affairs are caused by a combination factors (with unmet needs or other problems in the marriage being only one part of one set).

Does he really love me?

Question:

I am 350 pounds and 59, and I'm very sad inside and ashamed of my body sometimes. But my husband said he loves me and most of all I turn him on, which I do but to me I feel maybe it's just him thinking of sexual things? He does say he likes looking at me, but I'm not sure if it's true? Sad heart...

Peggy's Response:

This letter is not about extramarital affairs, but I also deal with marriage/relationship issues on this website, so I thought it would be a good idea to focus on a non-affair-related issue. See the section on my website listing [Articles about Marriage and Family](#). (I'll address the specific issues raised in this letter at the end of this response—after first making some comments about how this issue does relate to affairs.)

This letter presents a concern that relates to affairs in that many people somehow believe their spouse's affair is directly related to how attractive/appealing/sexy they find their mate. This concern, as with many aspects of affairs, does not hold up under closer scrutiny. For instance, we have only to look at all the supposedly "ideal" women whose husband's have affairs. (While women also have affairs, the stereotype is that it's the men who are lured away by a sexier-looking model. Women are usually presumed to be "looking for love.")

We have only to look at the lives of some of the "beautiful people" to see that a terrific physical appearance does not provide protection from a spouse's affair—just as a less-than-perfect physical appearance does not dictate a spouse's lack of love or desire—or commitment. There's a long list of well-known desirable women whose husbands have had affairs. Jackie Kennedy was, in her day, the epitome of the "ideal woman:" beautiful, intelligent, sophisticated... By today's standards, someone like Halle Berry is considered "ideal," but she, too, is not immune to having a husband who reportedly has had many affairs. (In fact, one report summed it up by calling him the "dumbest man in America.") But Halle understands it is not a reflection on her and has even stated that she hopes "to help other women who are walking through the same emotional maze." Obviously, no one is immune from affairs—and certainly they're not immune based on their physical attributes.

Now to address the specific issues presented in this letter...

Most of us as women don't like our bodies; so it's easy to see how a 350-pound woman, especially in this society, might feel this way. Some people may question whether such a woman is as loved and desired as is described above. However, I can personally vouch for this kind of love. My own mother weighed about 275 pounds for most of her life—and my father loved her and desired her (every night, in fact, which was much more than she wanted).

Setting aside health-related issues for a moment (and only focusing on self-esteem and being loveable), mature love is always based on loving the whole person, not "body parts." So instead of losing out on the richness of this mature love (by focusing on only the body), it's so much better to be open to the good feelings that come from being truly loved for who you are. Frankly, even people who do believe they're loved often fail to be comforted by that love because they hide and cover up so much of their real selves that they're concerned that their partner isn't fully "loving them for who they are"—because they don't really know who they are. For more about this "full love experience," see the article under the "[Articles about Affairs](#)" section of the website titled "The Full Monty."

I also encourage you to read the article on my website (under the [Marriage and Family](#)) titled: "The Changing Nature of Love," which is excerpted from our book, *Making Love Stay*.

SEXUAL ADDICTION?

Is he a "sex addict?"

Question:

My husband (and his therapist) say that he is a "sex addict." How can it be detected that addiction is not used just as an excuse to explain extramarital affairs?

Peggy's Response:

It's quite reasonable to question the idea of reducing the reason for a person's affairs to a simple "label" that supposedly explains their behavior. "Sex addict" is one of the most common labels—especially when someone has multiple affairs. (A sex addict is defined as a person who is addicted to the sexual experience and its surrounding behaviors.) Sexual addiction actually includes deviant sexual behavior that has nothing to do with affairs, but the term has been used to include any person whose sex life is destructive and out of control.

Even if there's a tendency toward an addictive personality—in general, the reasons for affairs are much more complex than this kind of simplistic explanation. Even the person who coined the phrase "sexual addiction" indicated that it may be relevant in only a few cases (perhaps 7 percent). But many people are tempted to grasp at this label as the cause of affairs—whether or not it fits.

Regardless of any particular label that is applied to a person who has had secret affairs, the critical factor is what happens now that the situation is out in the open. Since most irresponsible (or "addictive") behavior is couched in secrecy, it's important that the person be held "accountable"—meaning there needs to be an ongoing focus on honesty.

So the bottom line for any person who has been involved in secret sexual experiences (regardless of the label or diagnosis) is "What are you going to do about it from this point on?"

Is it a sexual addiction?

(I'm printing two of the questions I've received related to sexual addiction.)

Question #1:

My husband of 25 years has had several affairs. He also has been visiting a prostitute for the past 12 months and paying \$200 at a time. Could he have a sexual addiction?

Question #2:

My husband had multiple affairs over our 10-year marriage. I found out and confronted him. My concern now, 2 years later, how do you know if it is sexual addiction or not?

Peggy's Response:

Accurately determining whether or not the label "sexual addiction" fits a particular person's behavior is not something that can be easily determined. It's not just the behavior itself that needs to be considered. It's also whether it's out-of-control in the sense that they "want" to change it, but feel they can't.

Unfortunately, labels can become catch-alls used in an effort to find a clear cause for the behavior. But it's seldom as simple as assigning a particular label. (For a more complete overview of the combination of factors that usually contribute to affairs, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Why do people have affairs?")

Determining when the label "sexual addiction" is appropriate is quite a challenge—even for a counselor or therapist. For those who are accurately diagnosed as having a sexual addiction, I recommend the classic book in the field: *Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction* by Patrick J. Carnes. (It may be found in bookstores, but it is also available through Amazon.com)

Also, help is available (for both the sexual addict and their partner) through some of the groups to be found on the Internet that specialize in this problem, including: Sex Addicts Anonymous, Sex Addiction Help, and The National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity.

However, most people who have affairs are not sex addicts. They have just developed a very bad habit of having affairs, finding them personally satisfying, and not really wanting to give them up. In fact, only about 7 percent of affairs are the result of "sexual addiction" (according to Patrick Carnes, who coined the phrase). So I have devoted my time and effort to dealing with the 93 percent of those having affairs who are *not* driven by a sexual addiction.

For a brief article that has been posted on my website for several years, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Sexual Addiction?"

What about an addiction?

Question #1:

My wife had an affair with a man she met on the Internet chats. She told me that she met with many other men that she met thru the chats and was planning on continuing, but I discovered the affair and she had to stop. We both agree that she is addicted to the internet chats and has gone as far as to have phone sex with people she has met on those chats. When I ask her to stop, she tells me that it is very difficult for her and beside that she likes it. What should I do?

Question #2:

My husband admitted during therapy that not only had he had numerous affairs in his first 25 year marriage but that he had had 2 flings during our 7 year marriage. The therapist suggested he attend sex addiction recovery groups and we have been in recovery for 2 1/2 years. I know your stance on addiction (about 7%), but how else can you explain his struggles with objectification of women, past frequent masturbation and Internet porn that have plagued him since he was a teenager?

Peggy's Response:

While most affairs cannot legitimately be blamed on "addiction," that's not to say that there aren't instances where it applies. In fact, addiction seems to be even more prevalent among men who make heavy use of pornography on the Internet and pursue "Online Affairs." In those instances, the percentage is probably much higher than the estimated 7%. (The 7% mentioned in this question refers to the Article posted on my website titled: "Sexual Addiction?")

For instance, the above questions reflect situations where they may be a true addiction issue. It seems more likely with Question #2 where porn has been a long-term problem. In Question #1, saying she has "difficulty in stopping" sounds like an indication of addiction, but also saying: "besides that she likes it" makes it sound less like a compulsion than a desire.

It's more an indication of an addiction when there is a desire to stop but a seeming inability to do so. Also, it's more likely to be an addiction when there is a preoccupation or obsessing about the sexual activity so that it dominates your life. For instance, simply having multiple affairs (when it does not meet these criteria) does not necessarily indicate an addiction.

The whole issue of sexual addiction is much like alcohol or drugs or any other addiction in that each case must be individually assessed. And, also as with alcohol or drugs, it's essential that the person acknowledge that they have a problem and be willing to seek help. Otherwise, there's very little that can be done to help them change.

The bottom line is that there's no way to properly apply the label of "sex addict" in the abstract. But there are tools to help assess a particular individual's likelihood of being addicted—and many of these resources can be found on the Internet.

So regardless of whether or not the affairs begin "online," when they truly are an addiction, then it's important to seek both information and help. While the Internet is the host for the incidence of Online Affairs...it also can serve as a resource for dealing with this and related issues.

At the end of my eBook titled "Online Affairs" (which provides the Results of my Surveys on Online Affairs) I list a few Internet websites providing resources to help deal with this issue, including:

- Dr. Carnes' Resources for Sex Addiction & Recovery
- Online Sex Addiction
- Sex Addicts Anonymous

- Sexual Recovery Institute
- Sex Addiction Help
- Center for Online Addiction

For more about Online Affairs in general, see the Article that has been posted on my website for several years that follows the typical scenario and provides some reflections on this common progression of "Online Affairs."

PREVENTING AFFAIRS

How can I prevent an affair?

Question:

My husband has promised to be monogamous, but I'm still concerned. I want to do whatever I need to do to keep him faithful. How can I prevent him from ever having an affair?

Peggy's Response:

There's no "one-time" promise or event that can guarantee monogamy; it's an ongoing process of honest communication that allows you to really "know" each other, thus not deceive each other. You can significantly increase the chances that your marriage can be monogamous by recognizing "what doesn't work" and "what is more likely to work" in preventing affairs.

What doesn't work:

- Repeating the marriage vows doesn't prevent affairs.
- Love doesn't prevent affairs.
- Being the "perfect" partner doesn't prevent them.
- Threats don't prevent them.
- Simple promises don't prevent them.
- Getting caught doesn't prevent them.

What is more likely to work:

- Awareness that no one is immune to having an affair.
- Discussion and agreement about your commitment to monogamy.
- Regular renewal of your commitment.
- Ongoing, honest communication about all important issues.

In the final analysis, it's important to accept that the issue of monogamy never gets settled "once and for all." As stated above, it's an ongoing issue that requires ongoing honest communication.

Will he have an affair after we're married?

Question:

My fiancée has had one online relationship which was semi-serious in the past. It started before we met, but didn't end until a few months after I started dating him. He refused my pleas to break contact with her. Is that an indicator that he will have a real affair when we are married?

Peggy's Response:

I have often written that one of the keys to rebuilding a marriage following an affair is "severing contact with the third party." The above situation (while being an "online relationship" that happened before marriage) does involve some similar issues.

First of all, there's always a reasonable concern that a relationship that was *once* "more than friends" can be transformed into a "friends only" relationship. But, more important than that is an understanding that it's not necessarily the degree to which there is a *real* "threat" to the primary relationship by virtue of ongoing contact. Rather, it's the lack of caring about the feelings of the primary partner that is demonstrated by an unwillingness to sever contact. When someone *seems* to care more about maintaining a friendship than about their partner's feelings of anxiety or uneasiness about the friendship, this may be an indicator of an even more serious issue.

So in a situation like the one described above—while there may be no direct indicator of a likelihood of having a real affair after getting married, there *is* an indicator that decisions may not be made based on consideration of their impact on the partner. This kind of attitude, of course, has far-reaching implications for all kinds of issues that have nothing to do with affairs.

None of these kinds of assessments or decisions, however, can responsibly be made by simply trying to "figure it out" in your own head. It's important to *talk*, clearly and rationally, about the issue of caring and sensitivity to each other's feelings and the impact that each person's behavior (in all significant areas of life) can have on their primary partner.

How can I stay hopeful about marriage?

Question:

I'm not married. I'm 21 yrs. old now. I read about the growing incidence of infidelity on the part of women, and I am now thoroughly disheartened. Infidelity seems so common in our society. It is expected and accepted. I'm not religious at all and yet I still want to believe in the ideal of marriage. Of loving and being with only one person for the rest of your life. How can I stay hopeful about marriage when the reality is often soul crushing?

Peggy's Response:

It's still possible to be hopeful about marriage—just not in the old way where we had "blind hope" and "blind faith" that being in love was all it took and you could expect to "live happily ever after." It was never that simple, but now it's more important than ever that couples invest time and energy in sustaining and maintaining their marriage—and their love. (Just any kind of marriage is not the goal; the goal is to have a "good" marriage" that is mutually satisfying.)

It's true that the Newsweek article highlights the fact that the old standard of expecting/assuming that "women" would be the guardians of marriage by avoiding the kinds of temptations that men have experienced for many years. It's now clear that it's up to *both* people in the relationship to guard the marriage against the forces that can tear it down.

So smart couples will pursue some kind of marriage enrichment program—*before* there is a serious problem. Actually, an "ideal marriage" has probably never been realistic. The more you learn about the truth behind the image of most marriages, you'll find that the fairytale image of the ideal marriage never really existed. In the "old days" (when people "seemed" to have ideal marriages), it was because they settled for what they had and made the best of it in a way that we don't tend to do today. Our expectations have become much higher—often unreasonably high.

While this may sound disparaging of the possibilities within marriage, that's not the case at all. In fact, we've sold the real meaning of marriage short by seeing it primarily as a source of "romantic love." While love is important, we need to be clear about what we really mean by "love."

On the website is a section of Articles called: "Articles about Marriage and Family" where you can find more information that will be helpful in clarifying the nature of love. They include: "The Changing Nature of Love" (which is an excerpt from our book, *Making Love Stay*) and "The Full Monty" (which is a chapter James and I wrote and contributed to a book by a number of experts titled: *Why Do Fools Fall in Love?*)

I'll close by quoting a brief excerpt from "The Full Monty:"

...love is far more complex than our simple notions of romance or friendship or partnership. In fact, essential to experiencing the full force of love in our lives is learning to respect love's significance and clearly understanding just what's at stake. Love is not some little fringe issue that exists in isolation; it's part of your total world, it's a central force that is integral to your life as a whole.

Will he ever cheat on me?

Question:

I don't think my husband has ever cheated on me, but I am beginning to wonder if he has thought about it, or is thinking about it. Are there any kind of signs that I could maybe look out for? I don't know to do.

Peggy's Response:

No one can ever be absolutely positive that their partner would never have an affair. So the thoughts in this letter are somewhat universal. It's important to recognize that everyone is "vulnerable" to having an affair, that no one is immune. But it's also important to communicate about this issue. Most people are like the person who wrote this letter in that they have all kinds of private fears that they're afraid to confront. They look for "signals" or try to find meaning in various actions (or inactions).

For instance, the fact that your partner "looks" at others (or even is attracted to others) is not, in and of itself, a problem; in fact, it's natural to be attracted to others. The problem comes if the attraction is acted on. And the best way to decrease the likelihood of that happening is to honestly discuss this issue and your feelings about it on an ongoing basis. That's because attractions become a much greater threat to the relationship if it's taboo to acknowledge them. If you can't talk about these feelings, they become your own private secret and are likely to grow in intensity and desire. But openly discussing your feelings brings a degree of reality to the issue that leads to a more sensible and responsible way of thinking, which in turn reduces the desire to act on the attractions.

The bottom line is that when most couples start getting "serious," they start to feel jealous and competitive with others and they make it clear by words or actions that they don't like it when their partner looks at anyone else or admires anyone else in any way. This, of course, does not stop the interest in others; it just means the interest goes "underground" in that the person simply stops letting their partner know of their interest in others. This begins a cycle of secrecy: if you can't tell your partner when you find someone attractive, you won't tell them when you're tempted to act on that attraction, and you certainly won't tell them if and when you do take any action. While this should not be taken as a license to be gross or crude or embarrassing, couples do need to be able to talk candidly (and realistically) about this whole issue in order to prevent the very thing they fear.

Would my partner be able to cheat on me?

Question:

I'm worried about whether my partner would be able to cheat on me. Am I being neurotic about this? Should I stop asking questions? I'm almost totally sure that nothing is happening—but sometimes I still feel scared.

Peggy's Response:

This kind of questioning is common, and there's no clear answer as to whether the suspicions are justified. On the one hand, no one is immune from affairs. Anyone is vulnerable (or "able to cheat"), but that doesn't mean they will. So "blind trust" is not warranted, but neither is rampant suspicion.

Usually, when people can communicate openly about natural attractions to others, it makes it less likely that they will act on those attractions. It's when attractions are hidden away as secret fantasies that they're more likely to grow and take on a life of their own, blocking out the reality of any consequences. On the other hand, casual comments about attractions can also be used to deliberately "throw a partner off guard," creating a false sense of security and providing more opportunity to pursue attractions without arousing suspicion.

Regardless of how much we might wish otherwise, monogamy is an issue that never gets settled once and for all. It requires ongoing, honest communication. Prevention is possible only through a commitment to honesty—not a "promise" to be monogamous.

What about acknowledging attractions to others?

Question:

I wonder if you could address the issues of preventing affairs for a couple who have agreed to date each other exclusively. Do you think it's advisable to seek full disclosure of everything related to fidelity while dating, including acknowledging attractions to others, or is that unrealistic and harmful? I have attempted, and sought, full disclosure but I found it kept emotions constantly stirred up and jealousy flaring.

Peggy's Response:

The above letter shows an impressive awareness of and commitment to "preventing affairs." And the effort to acknowledge attractions to others is definitely the wiser alternative to either denying attractions or keeping them secret.

Having said that, however, there is still the issue of learning how to go about sharing the information about attractions without "keeping emotions constantly stirred up and jealousy flaring." (More later on how to go about doing that.)

First, I'll offer a little more perspective on why it's a smart decision to talk about attractions rather than hide them. To more clearly explain why this is worth pursuing, I want to share some excerpts from our book, *Making Love Stay*.

If you try to deny the possibility of attractions, you send a subtle (or not so subtle) signal to your partner that you don't want to know about any of their feelings of attraction toward others. Since attractions are both normal and inevitable, you're in essence sending a message that says, "Lie to me; pretend you're never attracted to anyone else." This, of course, causes other problems related to honesty that can have serious consequences for your relationship.

Accepting the reality of attractions to others is the first step toward being able to keep them in perspective. If you see attractions as a direct threat to your love (thinking that if your partner loved you they would never be attracted to anyone else), you're granting power to attractions that they would not otherwise possess.

Attractions become a much greater threat to the relationship whenever acknowledging them is taboo. If you can't talk about these feelings, they become your own private secret and are likely to grow in intensity and desire. But openly discussing your feelings brings a degree of reality to the issue that leads to a more sensible and responsible way of thinking, which in turn reduces the desire to act on the attractions.

(end of excerpt from *Making Love Stay*)

As for how to deal with any jealousy or other emotional reactions to discussing attractions...

You can't reasonably expect to have these kinds of discussions unless you make a clear commitment to "responsible honesty"—which means understanding that this effort to honestly discuss attractions is for the specific purpose of preventing the attractions from getting out of hand. (Hiding attractions can be the first step toward hiding temptations, then hiding actions. So avoiding this first deception also avoids having the attraction escalate into temptation and action.)

In addition to helping prevent affairs, talking about attractions can draw you closer together and allow you to "really know each other." (Many couples cease to really know each other after years of withholding their private thoughts from one another.) And the distance created by this lack of sharing opens up possibilities for all kinds of secrets and the problems they can bring.

You can not overestimate the significance of establishing a strong commitment to honesty—which, by the way, is more than just "not lying;" it's "not withholding relevant information." Because regardless of any of the possible reasons/excuses someone may give for why they might have an affair, the rock-bottom reason (the "trump card" so to speak) is a willingness to be dishonest and deception. Without deception, there would be few affairs. So a commitment to honesty inherently helps to prevent affairs.

For more on this, you can read the Article posted on the website titled: "Preventing Affairs."

Should I be concerned?

Question:

My husband wants to attend his younger sister's 30-year high school reunion (his sis is one year younger). His high school sweetheart (with whom he had his first sexual experience) was his sis's classmate. When he wanted to attend his sister's reunion 10 years ago, I confronted him about wanting to see his former lover, but he belittled me by accusing me that I was being petty and small about his wanting to see his Puppy love. Should I be concerned about that? Do you have info regarding rekindling of "puppy luv?"

Peggy's Response:

There are many different situations where someone may wonder whether or not it's reasonable to be concerned about a possible affair. So this week I want to use this letter as a basis for discussing the issues that arise when you raise this kind of concern with your spouse.

For starters, whenever you approach your spouse about any concern or question you have about attractions or temptations, the way they react (or over-react, as described above) does not necessarily mean that an affair is on the horizon, but it is not a good sign for the state of the marriage.

The kind of counterattack described in this letter is just one of the many techniques people use to try to prevent you from asking questions. And anytime someone reacts with anger (instead of compassionate reassurance), it is simply aimed at stopping any further discussion. (Unfortunately, from the description of the impact on those who want to talk, it's pretty effective.)

So the above reaction is a classic example: He belittled me by accusing me that I was being petty and small about his wanting to see his Puppy love. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the angry response is almost always an effort to "shut you up" by whatever means necessary.

It may very well be that a spouse knows they have no intention of behaving irresponsibly. But all too often there are "accidental" affairs (where someone doesn't "intend" for their actions to lead to an affair), but where it happens nonetheless. Unfortunately, it's more likely to happen when there is no ongoing communication about the possibility. Anytime something is *not* discussed, it's easier to block out any of the realistic consequences.

If this were his *own* class reunion, perhaps he would agree either to not attend it—or for the two of you to go together and avoid any one-on-one time with the high school sweetheart. However, this is his little sis's reunion—which means there is no legitimate reason for him to attend—and his desire to do so makes it highly suspect.

Frankly, a failure to show understanding and compassion for your discomfort with his wanting to go may represent a more significant problem in the marriage than the "risk of an affair." When one spouse no longer "cares" about the feelings of the other (and the impact of their actions on the other), this represents a problem beyond any specific focus on affairs. In fact, with or without counseling, it may be wise to focus more generally on the condition of the relationship than just on the issue of affairs.

Parents sharing sex information with their teens?

Question #1:

I discovered my husband's infidelity when diagnosed with trichomoniasis. I am reeling with the news. We are going for counselling and getting tested. Kids (17, 19, 25, 26) know something is very wrong. Youngest is exhibiting risky behaviors. Should I tell the kids? Not vengeance, but for shock teaching about sexual health and enlisting their help & understanding. Husband is on out of town assignment for another year. I may be staying with him more than usual for counselling to happen.

Question #2:

My son is 14 and has a girlfriend...I found a condom in his room, not sure how to handle this situation, I don't want to lose my cool when discussing this issue. Any suggestions, I know kids are having sex at a young age but I do not agree with this, and I want my son to remember the values I have tried to instill. Help!!

Question #3:

We have two teenager daughters. We have tried to be very open about talking "sex" with them. But my wife and I are also very active sexually, having passionate sex almost every other day. Does that send a wrong message?

Peggy's Response:

I'll first address the more general questions in #2 and #3 above—then later focus on the particular issue described in question #1 related to telling kids about a parent's affair.

I'm glad to be receiving questions about the degree of honesty that is appropriate between parents and their kids regarding sexual issues. I'll state up front that I am biased in favor of more honest communication between parents and kids about all important life issues, including sex. I strongly encourage what I call "responsible honesty" about sex—which means honesty that is specifically for the purpose of establishing and maintaining open communication about this very important aspect of being human.

For instance, while we don't need to provide kids with the "details" of our sex lives (as presented in question #3 above), it's important to be able to honestly discuss the emotional/loving aspects of sex, and not just focus on "plumbing," which does nothing to prepare kids for a mature sex life as adults.

The greater danger is what typically happens... that parents give their kids far too little reliable sexual information. In fact, when it comes to dealing with kids and sex, just saying "Don't" is grossly failing your responsibility as a parent. It's understandable as parents that we want to control the sexual behavior of our teenagers. But we don't have the kind of control we might wish (or think we have)—unless we *also* have lots of in-depth give-and-take conversations that allow us to actually influence their behavior. Trying to control (rather than influence) just doesn't work—and you never even know it because your kids don't confide in you.

Below is a statement issued at the conclusion of a coalition of organizations attending a one-day colloquium on this issue (including the American Medical Association, the American School Health Association, the Association of Junior Leagues, the Girls Clubs of America, the Alan Guttmacher Institute, and New York University):

Eighty percent of parents agree that it is their responsibility to provide sexuality education to their children, YET FEW ACTUALLY DO SO.

The above quote is used as the introduction to an article permanently posted on the website titled: "For Parents Only: Providing Sex Education for your Children." (You can find this article under the Articles about Marriage & Family section.) James and I originally wrote this as part of a larger work on various sex-education issues. I encourage all parents to read it and to answer for yourself the question that it poses: Are you prepared to accept this responsibility?

Now, to focus on the kind of situation described in Question #1... where the issue relates to a parent's affair. (Note that some of the comments about this situation are also relevant to any parent-child sexual discussions, not just those related to a parent's affair.)

The idea of using a parent's affair to "educate" teenagers and adult children about sexual health issues is a potentially positive way to open up a dialogue about a variety of responsible ways of dealing with sexuality. However, it will only serve a positive purpose if it is restricted to that focus and not also used (as mentioned in the question) to "enlist their help and understanding" (presumably in dealing with the feelings about the husband's behavior). That sounds too much like vengeance, despite the protestations otherwise.

The way to insure that sharing with the kids is undertaken as a "teaching opportunity" is to do it only with the involvement of the husband. Otherwise, the message will be far too skewed toward "judging/retaliating against the father" vs. the kids "learning a lesson for themselves."

The husband may resist joining in this endeavor (hoping to avoid having the children know about his actions), but his reaction can be judged as indicating whether he cares more about his children—or protecting his own image. It's not what mistakes we make in life that define our character. It's how we respond to those mistakes. Do we take responsibility for them? Do we find a way to use our mistakes to learn from them? Do we find a way to use our experience to help others? Really focusing on this can enable a person to "do the right thing."

(In this case, doing the right thing would be for the father to use this experience to help his children avoid a similar problem in the future. Regardless of what people know "in the abstract" about risks/dangers, they inevitably learn much more when it's "up close and personal.")

As I said earlier, I have a bias toward more responsible honesty with our children about sexual issues, including about a parent's affair. In general, I think it's better to err on the side of more honesty rather than less, even when the children are younger. To read about our own experience with telling our children and the learnings we think they gained, see the Article on the website (under the Marriage & Family section) titled "Telling the Children?"

I am not alone in this approach to dealing with the kids. In 1998 I was interviewed for an article for Newsday Magazine that includes quotes from a psychotherapist about the potential "positive impact on the children" from disclosing an affair. See the Article on the website (under the Marriage & Family section) titled "Talking Honestly With Your Children." (As alluded to in this article, it's possible that giving kids a more realistic understanding of the risk of affairs may help them avoid having this experience in their own lives—which might be the most potentially positive benefit of all.)

How to deal with teenage sex?

Question:

Ok, I have found out that my two daughters have had sex or are having sex, now what do I do? I have tried to communicate to them the importance of waiting until marriage. But the 15 year-old and now my 16 year-old admit they have had sex. What happened? How do I deal with this? Do I ban the boyfriend?

Peggy's Response:

While my website is primarily devoted to dealing with extramarital affairs, I do have a section on "Marriage and Family," including some information related to teenagers and sex. But there is also a direct connection between teenage sex and extramarital affairs—because a common thread of secrecy and deception can be found in both.

In fact, one of the many factors that contributes to extramarital affairs is the fact that most teenagers learn that "secrecy and sex go hand-in-hand." Teenagers learn to lie to their parents to hide their sexual activities, and they use this same learned pattern of deception in marriage when it comes to affairs.

Before specifically addressing the problem described in this week's question (where, at least, the parent knows about the teenagers' sexual activity)... I'll share more perspective on the connection between teenage secrecy and deception in affairs in this excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*:

Learning to Lie about Sex

One of the most basic of the societal factors contributing to affairs is the general dishonesty about sex that exists at all stages of our lives. Our parents are seldom honest with us about sex when we're growing up. Very few children get good information about the physical aspects of sex. And almost none of us gets sound information about sexuality and sexual love. As teenagers, we continue this pattern of secrecy by presenting a false image to our parents when we first become sexually active. When a teenager is dating and is supposed to avoid sexual intercourse (but they want to do it), they usually wind up doing it in a secretive way, while pretending to their parents that they're not.

By the time a person gets married, they have had plenty of practice at being deceptive and dishonest about sex. So when a person is married and is supposed to be monogamous (but they want to have sex with someone else), they often go ahead and do it in a secretive way, while pretending to their spouse that they're not. When faced with a decision about monogamy or having an affair, their only prior experience in dealing with this kind of sexual conflict was to sneak around and secretly do what they wanted, while pretending they weren't.

When one woman discovered her husband had been having affairs for 10 of the 15 years of their marriage, she was overwhelmed by the contrast to his "faithful husband" image during that time. It seemed impossible that he could have been so deceptive. But it's easier to understand when we realize that this kind of pretense is what we learned as teenagers hiding our sex lives from our parents. When a married person has a secret affair, they're simply continuing the pattern of deception learned while growing up.

Just as our parents didn't question us directly about their suspicions when we were teenagers, most of us don't question our mates directly about our suspicions of affairs. At all stages of our lives, the primary way we deal with sexual issues is to close our eyes and hope for the

best. This kind of conditioning to be deceptive is an important factor in understanding why affairs happen.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Finally, for more specific guidance re: “dealing with daughters’ sexual activity... The following is a very long excerpt from an Article posted on my website titled: “For Parents Only: Providing Sex Education for your Children” (It is under the listings for “Articles about Marriage & Family.”)

Your Greatest Challenge

Keeping open the lines of communication is the real challenge you face as a parent today. Forget about control. Work hard to maintain the ability to influence your teen. Don't create or get drawn into a power struggle. This does not mean that you are "settling" for less; quite the contrary. It means you're pursuing a more significant goal that will allow you to have a much greater impact on your teen's well-being.

Making A Difference - Through Influence, Not Control

The truth is that you can't control what your teenager does sexually, but you can influence them if you establish a trusting relationship so they can talk to you without fear or embarrassment. While you may genuinely believe they should abstain from sex during their teen years, this needs to be a result of their decision, not your demand.

Teens are unwilling to expose themselves to parents who they believe will only be critical and judgmental. If you want to make a difference in the choices your teen makes, you have a better chance if you focus on how you can influence them rather than trying to control them.

Communicating With Your Teen About Sex

Perhaps you fear that acknowledging and dealing openly with the reality of teenage sexual activity will somehow "encourage" your teen to be sexually active. Overwhelmingly, the studies of this issue say just the opposite is true. It's the lack of communication that contributes to irresponsible sexual behavior by teenagers.

Not talking to your teen about sex (or talking to them only in terms of "don't") won't keep them from having sex - but it WILL keep them from letting you know about it. Most teenagers are going to engage in sex whether or not their parents or other adults acknowledge they know it or openly discuss it with them.

But if teenagers can't discuss routine sexual issues they deal with on an ongoing basis, they're unlikely to feel they can come to us in times of serious problems, like an unwanted pregnancy. As one astute 17-year old explained, "It isn't the kids of parents who say they are for or against sex...who get pregnant. It's the kids who can't talk to their parents at all."

The seriousness of this particular problem is illustrated by the following fact: "The conflicted and dogmatic way we teach children about sexuality in America is obviously not working. Our pregnancy rate for girls under age fifteen is more than five times the rate of any developed country, anywhere in the world!" (From *Risking the Future: Adolescent Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Childbearing*, vol. 1, edited by Cheryl D. Hayes; Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.)

Teenagers are becoming sexually active earlier and they are far more sophisticated in their sexual behavior than teenagers of two generations ago. Unfortunately, they aren't sophisticated enough in some respects. Even though they can walk into any drug store and

buy a variety of birth control devices or have a doctor prescribe one without their parent's consent, unwanted teenage pregnancies are hitting epidemic proportions.

You need to help them think about these issues in advance so they'll be better prepared to make responsible decisions. This involves developing a "way of thinking" about the whole issue of sexual involvement that fortifies your teen with the ability to avoid being "swept along" in the moment.

Your success at becoming comfortable with talking to your teen about these issues depends in large part on your belief in the importance of doing so. Here's why it's important. You make it virtually impossible for your teen to develop sexual responsibility if you don't discuss sex with them - or if you simply try to dictate their behavior. Responsibility comes only through the ability to make informed choices. And informed choices aren't possible unless your teen can have ongoing dialogue with a responsible adult - preferably you, their parent - who cares about their well-being.

If you think you're simply not up to the task of talking to your teen about sex, it doesn't mean you're "off the hook." It's still your responsibility to see that your teen has someone to talk to about these issues, preferably another family member who cares for their well-being. You can also encourage your teen to seek out information about sex and sexuality from school counselors or other agencies serving teenagers. Don't leave them to rely on luck, instinct, or friends for such critical information. They're forming sexual attitudes and habits that will influence their entire life. It's too important to be left to chance.

Most of us have no models for the kind of skilled communication we're suggesting. We often make an attempt to start and then get discouraged when the kids don't buy in immediately or when they callously rebuff our best efforts. But we must persist in trying to establish a new way of relating to our kids. There's a striking difference in the effect on your teen based on whether you're rigid and absolute or understanding and available.

The difference is clearly indicated in the following scenarios:

Being Rigid and Absolute

Parent: Since you believe you know what's best for your teen, you try to impose your will on them. You don't wait for them to ask for your opinion or advice; you give it to them constantly, with an air of superiority that shows them clearly who's "boss." For instance, you don't have conversations with your teen about sex; you give "orders" as to where they can and can't go, what they can and can't wear, and what they will and won't be allowed to do.

Teen: You don't directly confront your parent because you know it won't do any good. You just turn inward, avoiding contact and conversation with them. You stay in your room a lot whenever you're home, which is as little as possible. You feel perfectly justified in deceiving them - about your sex life and about all other aspects of your life. You're convinced they wouldn't understand anything about you anyway, so you find other people who do "understand," and shift your allegiance and sense of belonging to them.

Being Understanding and Available

Parent: Even though you have many demands on your time and energy - job, family, community - you make a point of noticing when your teen seems inclined to talk and you make every effort to be fully available at that moment, before it passes. You realize that you can't schedule opportunities to relate to your teenager, like insisting that the family has at least one meal together each day. Instead, you stay tuned in to the subtle signs they send that

indicate they might be open to discussing something with you. You know that if they feel they have to fight for your attention, they won't bother; so you stay "connected." You make a conscious, deliberate decision that maintaining this connection is a high priority, and you don't let other things crowd it out.

Teen: You're very conscious of the fact that your parent is "there" for you, not just physically present, but also "on your side." You feel more capable of making good decisions, knowing you're not alone, that you can discuss issues with your parent. Because of their level-headed reaction to whatever you talk to them about, you get the feeling that you could discuss anything with them - and you do.

Here are some guidelines that might be helpful in preparing your kids to deal in a responsible way with whatever situation they might face.

- * Don't allow others to pressure you into sexual acts you're uncomfortable with, and don't pressure others to conform to your wishes.

- * Take responsibility for your own satisfaction or lack of it and for the impact of your behavior on your partner.

- * Consider and be prepared to deal with the consequences of your sexual behavior.

- * Think for yourself. Don't "go along with the crowd" or automatically reject what your parents have to say. Talk to others, listen to them, and then decide for yourself.

- * Develop a healthy attitude toward sex, appreciating its beauty as part of a loving relationship.

- * Base your sexual relationships on equality. An imbalance of power and control leads to frustration, unhappiness, and regret.

- * Build your sexual relationships on a basis of honesty. Dishonesty or deception may be tempting, but it will keep you from enjoying the intimacy that's possible only in an open, honest relationship.

The guidelines listed above are only an example. You need to develop your own list based on considering your personal values and beliefs in the context of the reality of the world in which your teens live.

Finally, it's important to remember that you bear the burden of carrying the conversations with your teen. It's your responsibility to initiate dialogue; you can't expect or wait for them to take the initiative. If your teen does seek your counsel and guidance, great. But don't hold your breath waiting for that to happen. It's up to you to start the dialogue - and to sustain it. This means being persistent and not giving up.

Your challenge is not to find the right words; it's to develop the right attitude - based on creating a climate of openness for dialogue. In fact, real dialogue by its very nature is the opposite of a script made up of specific words. When you work on your own attitudes and beliefs, the "right" words will arise from there. This involves genuinely believing in the benefits of open communication, and demonstrating to your teen that they can feel safe to confide in you, knowing you will talk *with* them, not *at* them.

You need to develop a *relationship* with your teen that will allow you to have the kind of ongoing dialogue that's essential. If you don't work on the quality of your relationship, no words will "work." If you develop a relationship based on trust and mutual respect, the words will follow naturally. Your communication will be based on a true give and take of ideas - not a one-way street where you tell them precisely what to do and what not to do.

Nothing - no specific information or beliefs or rules - is as important as keeping open the lines of communication with your teenager. If you lecture your teenager instead of just talking with them, they're likely to tune you out and take in very little of what you have to say. In addition, they're likely to block you out of knowing what they're thinking and doing regarding most important issues in their lives, including sexual issues. The power you may feel you're exercising by "laying down the law" as to what your kids can and cannot do is an illusion. If you make sex into a battleground with a winner and a loser, you're sure to lose. You may not know at the time that you're losing, but you are. (And so are they.)"

You're not only losing the benefit of having your teen confide in you and consult with you about sexual matters, but you're losing their openness to confiding in you about other serious issues, like drugs. The more you move toward open discussion, the clearer it becomes that the lack of honest communication about sexual issues is at the core of the seemingly inevitable conflicts between parents and teens. If you break through that barrier, you'll find your teenager won't have the same need to "shut you out" or be sullen or uncommunicative. By avoiding a power struggle, you can avoid being alienated from your teen just when they need you most.

Demonstrating Honesty

As the parent of a teen, you may have said, "you can come to me with any questions," or "you can talk to me about anything." But most teens won't feel safe to do that unless you "go first" by showing it's a two-way street. Only if they hear that you had some of the same questions and concerns when you were a teenager are they likely to believe you actually understand what they're going through. So if you want your kids to come to you with their problems and concerns about sexual matters (and other problems as well), you might better achieve this by setting an example, by telling your kids about your own time as a teenager and how you felt and acted regarding sexual matters.

You may be very uncomfortable with this whole idea of being honest with your kids about sex. Understandably, you might prefer to forget (or hide) some of your own teenage experiences, but telling them is not as much risk as you might think because they see right through the hypocrisy anyway. It may help to remind yourself that it's not a matter of "show and tell." In fact, the main teaching is not about sex per se, it's about the importance of honesty—honesty in all important matters. You're "educating" your teens about much more than sex. You're helping them grow in their ability to make good choices and to decide important issues in life for themselves.

(end of excerpt from: "For Parents Only" under "Articles about Marriage and Family")